



# **A NIGHT GARDEN**

**and other stories**

**by**

**Brian E. Drake**

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## CONTENTS

A Night Garden.....	3
Don Juan eats pastries in the afternoon.....	5
The Eternal Conflict Between Artist and Public.....	9
The Devotions.....	11
It makes sense.....	19
The Gods Despise Themselves.....	21
Pangloss Triumphant.....	29
The Mind of God.....	35
Just one thing I want to know.....	39
The Limitless Library.....	41
The Creative Process.....	45
The Two Dear Ladies.....	47
Our Cemetery.....	59
Something came between them.....	61
There Are Smiles.....	63
Footnote found in an old book.....	69
O tempora, O mores!.....	73
Hurka and Aimun.....	75
Haunting.....	83
The Perquisites of His Position.....	85
How to get here.....	115
Noir.....	117
Alan Steel An Essay.....	123
Moonlight and Lloyd Bridges.....	125
Hum.....	127
Some Places of Interest to the Anomalist.....	135
The Sphinxes.....	141
Technology.....	145
The God Machine.....	147
Punch Play.....	159
The Darkness of the Heart.....	163
Star-Born, Oblivion-Bound.....	199
End of the World.....	213



The art of literature, vocal or written, is to adjust the language so that it embodies what it indicates.

— A. N. WHITEHEAD





## A Night Garden

There is a garden in which evening primrose, moonflowers, night phlox and dianthus, belladonna, immortelles and jasmine, mimosa and cypress are planted. All the flowering plants here flower only at night. When the harsh sun sets, when the gentle moon rises, then the soft blooms open to the darkness. The plants are so arranged that there is always some pale blossom lurking in the deep shade, some sweet perfume sinking through the air.

It is a small garden, for no one can bear too much night. High walls of black stone enclose it, shut it away from the hasty world. A sign at the entrance reads, "Please close the gate behind you." The gate is of solid iron. Molded upon it is a complicated figure of twisting vines, formless fruits, and in their center the bearded face of some forgotten god. There is a tiny window through which passersby can look; but if anyone looks, they can see only a few black leaves, a few yards of the narrow path. But few of those hurrying along the street look; few even notice the door, though they may tremble unconsciously when they pass the high, black walls.

The pathway that leads from the gate is paved with blue stone and curves like a figure eight, turning upon itself endlessly. Where the path crosses itself is a crumbling sundial on a pedestal that leans sharply, so that the gnomon points to earth. At the outside of each curve of the figure eight is a bench, also of blue stone. The two benches are hard, cold, uncomfortable, but are worn smooth by long use, for in past times many

visited the garden, sat on the benches, looked at the flowers, the trees, the night.

Now only one visits the garden, but this one comes almost every evening. This one opens the little gate, which moves with a quiet creaking, enters, and carefully closes the gate again, which this time gives no sound. Slowly this one walks around the curving path once, against the flow of time. The blue stone crunches underfoot. This one touches the ruined sundial while passing the center, then sits on one of the benches, sometimes this one, sometimes that, and tells stories. Stories of heroes, lovers, unimagined beasts, distant lands; or simpler tales of the nameless, the unloved, beasts too well known, home. The tales aren't important. What's important is the telling.

Some evenings, when the moon is dark, or when the moon shines green, this one tells no tales but sings, simple tunes with simple words, or without any words at all. The tunes do not rise lightly, but hang heavy in the air, as though stifled by the weight of the high, black walls. When this one sings, the blossoms of the evening primrose or dianthus, immortelles or jasmine — whatever is blooming — the blossoms tremble, even if there is no breeze. The leaves of the mimosa close. Whatever sweet perfume there is drifts, fades, till the only scent is that of the earth, of wet leaves, of the sweat that dampens the high, black walls. On those evenings, this one does not stay long in the garden.

When the moon falls below the high walls, this one stands, walks slowly along the path in the opposite direction, with the flow of time, touches the ruined sundial, opens the little gate, which moves with a quiet creaking, goes out, and closes the gate carefully, which this time gives no sound. If it was a night in which this one sang, the flowers of the evening primrose or dianthus, the immortelles or jasmine, whatever is blooming, cease their trembling, and the leaves of the mimosa again open to the night.

## Don Juan eats pastries in the afternoon

He sits every day in a café on the Rathausstrasse in Vienna. Does he really live in Vienna?

“Spain was too hot,” he says, “in its weather, and otherwise.”

Sometimes, on particularly fine days, he sits outside at a table on the street and lets the sun touch him; most often he sits inside, behind a column in a dark corner. He sips wine and eats little pastries, one after the other. Tiny sweet things, often more than a dozen in a single day. But he never has more than one small glass of wine.

“These Austrian wines, they lack strength. Weight. The wines of Spain . . . that’s the one thing I still long for. I still miss them. They have a sting, you see? They prick the tongue and enliven the mind. But perhaps my memory fails me. It often fails me these days.” He chuckles.

Does he long only for Spanish wines? Certainly there must be something else. For example, the ladies?

“Ladies? Ladies are everywhere! There are always and ever ladies. Just try to avoid them! Impossible. They search one out, search by a thousand tricks. Oh, ladies, ladies. Greedy to possess, to have in their hands. Peasant women have more sense, they enjoy the moment and let it go. But ladies . . .”

The formerly tall hidalgo is rather shrunken nowadays. He has a hunch on his back. His hair — what remains of it — is pure white. His eyes, which once flashed to burn women’s hearts, are red and hide themselves within folds of skin. The strong yet soft hands that excited so many

breasts are spotted and tremble when he raises to his mouth another pastry.

"This wine is only just good enough, but the pastries . . . I applaud these Viennese fellows." He brushes away crumbs from his knotted, twisted fingers. One crumb hangs on his lip. His voice still carries music in it — tenor, not baritone — and his Castilian accent charmingly tortures the Viennese dialect.

Yes, but about those ladies.

"Oh, away with the ladies! What should an old man have to do with ladies? Age destroys everything, everything, but at least it gives one a little leisure. Blessed repose. But would you believe it," he leans forward confidentially, "sometimes, even now, a woman comes to me. To me!" He shakes his head. "Crazy! To come panting to an old man . . ."

But his reputation, fame . . .

"Damned fame, it still deceives women, deceives everyone. What good is it? None at all! Does nothing but make it hard to get credit. That's fame for you! Because I had a few adventures in my youth, should I suffer forever? I have an ancient name, a most respectable name. The follies of youth . . . well, and of a little later, too. Yes, I cuckolded some husbands, yes, even killed a few. And one father. But should such peccadilloes condemn a man his whole life? I've already had to leave Spain, my ancestral home, family, friends . . . the future I should have had. Haven't I suffered enough? Believe me, I'm sufficiently punished. All I have left to look forward to is that last, brief modulation. Yet they continue to think of me as some sort of untrustworthy rascal. You wouldn't believe how much a simple glass of second-rate wine and a few pastries cost in this town." He nibbles another pastry. "The chocolate ones are very good."

But if he suffers, that's simple justice. Isn't he a murderer?

He shrugs. "Such things don't matter much in Spain."

Then why is he living in Vienna?

"Well, on account of the families. You understand. Honor demands restitution, and my inheritance wasn't large enough to satisfy everyone, so . . . Vienna is more comfortable than Seville. But the prices! My room — and it's a small room, not much more than a closet — a fortune every month! And the doctors expect payment in advance. I have pain, here, and my liver troubles me."

His smile still holds the mix of good humor and haughty carelessness that fascinated more than one woman in years gone by. But he doesn't show his teeth: the pastries have not been kind to them. Behind his column he draws out a handkerchief, so worn that one can see through it. "My mother embroidered this. See? The arms of the Tenorios. Well, she sits in Heaven now. . . ." The hint of a tear dims his eye artfully.

So has he repented of his crimes?

"Crimes! What crimes? There were no crimes. That's how one behaves in Seville."

But the murders—

"Duels," he corrects. "Self-defense. Honor, you know."

And does honor explain the endless line of women, the eternal, unchecked hunger after women?

"Hunger? What a word! Hunger for women? What an idea! That's where poetry leads one. Stupid notions about hungering after women. Ridiculous!"

But—

"But but but! I didn't 'hunger' after women. Never!" His voice rises to an unmusical level. "I didn't even hunger for sex! What is sex? An awkward jumble with a moment of pleasure at the end that might better be self-induced. Hunger, what nonsense. Just the opposite. You hear? The opposite! Here, I'll let you in on a secret: I don't much like women. Understand? In fact, I dislike them . . . no, to put it more accurately, I detest them! Yes! I've always hated them. Terrible creatures, always demanding, always expecting, expecting. Who can tolerate them? And here's another secret. In fact . . . in fact, I'm terrified of women. Always have been. They frighten me to death. Why do you think I always ran away? I couldn't stand their clutching hands, grabbing, greedy hands, always demanding, demanding more than any man could give. Hunger! If I ever hungered after anything, it certainly wasn't women. No indeed! Did I hunger? Did I hunger?"

He looks vaguely at the glass, the table, the last pastry.

"Hunger. Yes, I hungered. I hungered for . . . acknowledgment! Acknowledgment, you understand? To be noticed. Not to disappear from this world unseen. That's no crime. Everyone wants to be acknowledged, everyone needs his existence noted. Isn't that the whole of human

history? Religion, politics, wealth, power, all just a matter of wanting, needing to be noticed. We're porcelain figures on a shelf, terrified of the dust. Most tumble off into the shadows, but I . . . I'm no different than . . .

"Well, what sort of mark could I make on the world? I wasn't clever. I was no warrior, battle terrified me almost as much as women. I was no good at making money — I am *hidalgo*. I have only one talent, only one: love. More precisely: the sexual act. Oh, how I howled to Heaven! My only talent, and it was utterly dependent upon the very creatures I loathed! But the need, yes, let's call it hunger, the hunger for recognition makes its demands. What a burden: the burden of talent! I almost forswore it, you know. Tried to ignore my talent. Almost succeeded in denying it. But to die unknown . . . me, to die unknown . . ." He eats the last remaining pastry.

The waiter knows the old Spaniard well. He fetches two more freshly baked pastries, one with cream.

"Ah, cream! Now that's a work of art, truly a work of art. This baker is an Apollo of the kitchen. But truth to tell, every baker in this town is an artist. I've never yet found a pastry that displeased me."

His voice again resonates musically. Although his dress is years out of fashion, it is clean, and he wears it with aplomb. He listens a moment to the noise of a *calèche* passing in the street, and slowly eats the pastries, sucks each crumb from his fingertips. A satisfied smile transforms his face. He raises his glass and inhales the wine's bouquet before draining it.

"Not a bad wine. No sting to it, but not bad. Well, it's coming on to dusk. Time to return to the safety and solitude of my tiny room."

He stands, takes an ebony cane from beside his chair. It is topped with the golden head of a lion. A youthful gleam lights his glance.

"Oh dear, I've forgotten my purse! How stupid of me. But you won't embarrass an old gentleman, will you? Thank you, many thanks. Leave ten kreuzer for a tip, the waiter's a good fellow, a very good fellow."

He limps out, but he swings the cane with a grand flourish.

## **The Eternal Conflict Between Artist and Public**

Fresh from its latest atrocity, it scuttered through the woods in a state of high hilarity, hairy arms swinging wide, purple chest heaving with giggles. This was a monster that thought itself cute.

It sniffed a taloned hand, breathed in the cheerful stench of blood and split bowels. It snickered.

Then it tumbled painfully into a deep pit concealed in the middle of the path. A flare of torches immediately appeared at the rim of the pit, underscored with triumphant shouts.

It gasped. What were they doing? Why? Did they not know it was adorable?





## The Devotions

Lady with a dog, walking a dog. Lady, not just a woman. grayish hair piled up, earrings very old-fashioned, no wild to them, dressed too nice to be walking a dog in the morning. Lady. Dog wearing a sweater. Lady wearing heels, walking very precise, no mud no splash on those shoes. Waits for a sunny day, hires someone to walk the dog on rainy days, cloudy days, busy days. Dog looks up at lady the whole time, doesn't sniff around like a dog. Looks up at lady, trips off curb a couple of times. Not a doggy dog.

Yeah, so I think, Yeah, her. I walk fast, catch up, not hard, heels don't move fast. Walk fast, step up beside her, don't look over. She just gives me a normal city check-out look. I move up fast in front of her, get twenty yards ahead, slow down to keep the distance. She's already forgetting me. I don't exist any more, I can tell. Torn denim jacket, boots, jeans, just another body, just another thing in the way up ahead.

I hang back to light up a cigarette so she comes up by me again. I don't inhale, the cigarette's just for effect, just an excuse. She comes up and right before she gets to me I start moving again, slow, her pace. Dog bumps my ankle, looks up at me surprised. I look down, smile at the dog, look up, smile at the lady. She smiles and tugs the dog away from me and moves on, no time lost, no pace missed. Contact is made.

No, I'm not going to kill her, not going to fall in love with her, not going to make her life misery or be kept by her or rape her. Better things

in store. Big things. She's the right type. She'll like it. She won't even know what's going on.

Her apartment's big, nice furniture, figurines and pictures and things. Very nice. Classic. Trays for serving dainty little sandwiches to lady guests. Glasses and bottles of liqueurs and such. Teapots, more than a couple, very nice. The bed is a regular full-size with king-size pillows, handmade quilt, very smooth sheets. No dog hair anywhere. Where does the dog sleep? Ah, the back room-study-teevee room. Big teevee. Impressive view of the park. She won't know I'm in here, that's all part of the job. Part of my life.

Maid to cook the dinner and straighten up. Nothing really to clean, everything's clean already, all the time. Cooks the dinner, sets the table, leaves a note, coat and purse and out the door. Maid is young, Hispanic. Big smile as she gets out the door before the lady returns.

I take my time, read the magazine titles in the bathroom (big bathroom, huge old tub with gold faucets), check the clothes in the closet, check the hidden cash supply, hidden jewels, hidden love letters, only two. Just for curiosity's sake. I'm not going to steal anything. I take off my jacket, hang it up next to a wool coat and a silk shawl in the closet, towards the back. Take off my boots, put them in the corner behind the exquisite vase of silk roses. Slightly old-fashioned, this decor. Very comforting, very cozy. I will like being here.

Lady comes in maybe an hour after I get comfortable. Dog runs right at me, doesn't bark. I like dogs. Lady sighs and kicks off shoes, moves into the kitchen automatically as I duck into shadow. Doesn't notice me, can't see me, all part of the job. I wait through dinner, through the teevee after, there's always teevee after. I wait through the bathroom ritual. She climbs into bed at last, glances at that impressive view through the window across from the bed, picks up a gallery catalog from the bedside table and flips the pages for ten minutes or so before she nods off. Dog is safely closed up in the teevee room in his little dog bed. Good dog.

I go up to her bed, in the dark, between the moonlight and the nice view and her. I go up to her. I slowly pull down the bedclothes. An old-fashioned word, bedclothes. I slowly pull down the bedclothes. She doesn't wake up. She's not a young woman but she sleeps soundly, she takes a pill now and then to help her sleep soundly, and those lovely

deep-breathing exercises like she saw on teevee who knows how many years ago. She's wearing an odd nightgown, odd for her, all silk and bows and satin ribbons and a bit too filmy and a bit too short for her knees. She sleeps with her mouth open, her teeth gleaming, all her own teeth, money does wonders and dieting helps. She breathes very, very gently. Noise of waving leaves through her teeth. Sweet-tasting breath, hint of the night bitterness to come.

I climb onto her bed, atop her quilt, lean over her. She does not wake. I have been doing this a long time, a very long time. I stare at her closed eyes a moment. I map her wrinkled eyelids. I begin to love her.

My mouth opens in that old familiar way, wider, wider. The jaw unhinges, the skin splits. I swallow her skull. No, she is not in pain, the statement is not exact. I don't swallow her skull, exactly. I embrace it with my throat.

I close my mouth gently about her wattled throat. She still breathes. She takes my breath and breathes. Understand, I have not broken her skin. I have not caused blood to flow. I am not interested in blood. I have not hurt her. I am not interested in hurting her. I will consume only a very special part of her, something she will not miss, something that sometimes causes her trouble.

Ah, she's dreaming now. Flat pictures. This disappoints me. Flat, black-and-white pictures like very old film ill cared for. This disappoints me. But I pay attention. Sometimes (seldom) I am surprised by imagination.

Someone is speaking to her, someone she knows or knew, a definite sense of recognition here, though in the dream she cannot recall. He is tall, handsome, distinguished, rich. Now he ripples and becomes someone else. Her dreaming self has not noticed the change, she experienced it as a quick cut to a new scene that was always there. I believe the scenery is Paris. Yes, I recognize one of the shops. She lived there in her youth, not really so long ago. This new man is not handsome, not distinguished. He kisses her. They make love in the street among the people passing by unperturbed. She is pregnant now. The unhandsome man has disappeared smiling. The distinguished man is dancing the rhumba with two prostitutes. She approaches him, coquettes, curtsies. He keeps dancing. There is music playing that we cannot hear. The picture becomes flatter.

The dream stumbles and shifts to a different place, a different backdrop, colors flat as sidewalk chalk pictures. She is not here, she is watching this one, as I am. Men in elaborate gowns of pale pastel waltz frenetically around a massive fountain in the shape of a raised arm and fist. My, how suggestive. Two of the men step out of the cotillion to take photographs with old-fashioned box cameras, black hoods over their heads. They peep out at us from under the black hoods and share with us the pictures, like a street tough showing obscene postcards. Big pieces of stiff paper are covered with faint lines and geometric figures. She believes this must be significant. She hopes to remember this when she wakes.

She won't. As the dreams spin on I suck them in, swallow them down, squeeze their little bit of flavor out of them into myself. The meal fills but does not satisfy. She continues dreaming and I continue feeding another hour. Then she moves beyond dreams into true sleep. I rest at the foot of her bed, curled about her chilled feet. Near dawn I sense her mind stirring again and hurry back into position. I spread my jaws. I take her into me. She dreams.

Later, a few weeks later, I know her well enough to be able to influence her dreams. I inject a bit more color, twist them to play more theatrically, gradually add characters, details, scents. She dreams the Paris dream often, and I liven up the background, put a few extras in the cafés, bring in that heady Parisian aroma of sewers and sweet fruit and cheap cheese and pissoirs. She takes it from there and brings in memories she didn't know she had. The feel of the cobbles under her back. The distinguished man's shoes (calfskin slippers with the merest hint of a heel). The taste of tobacco and red wine and her own flesh on the unhandsome man's tongue when they kiss. She is beginning to enjoy her dreams.

I am beginning to enjoy her dreams. I am a chef. I cannot produce the raw goods, but I can flavor them, spice them, whip them, soufflé them. We are enjoying ourselves. The dog is enjoying himself. She takes him out more often, speaks to him now, feeds him herself when the maid is not around. His name is Gabby. She has begun to call him Gabs.

I stare out her windows when she is out of the apartment. My jacket still hangs among her finer stuff. The maid has not removed it. The maid does not recognize it but leaves it where it hangs.

I give the lady a present on Christmas Eve. She dreams of a farmhouse, tiny, poorly furnished, warm, with a dirt floor and a large fireplace. Seven children of staggered heights are in two pallets before the fireplace. Three beaming adults with faces of cracked mud sit behind them in wooden rocking chairs. There are stockings nailed to the wall near the wood stove. A burlap bag of penny candies and exotic fruits like Florida oranges and California limes is hidden under the wooden bed. The children fall asleep one by one. As each falls asleep, he disappears. Soon the pallets are empty, neat empty bundles of linen. The three adults produce a jug of cider and when they open it the cider spurts out like champagne, turns blue and gold, becomes a Fourth of July sparkler of enormous proportions. The little one-room farmhouse sways and rocks and dances. We are outside the house now, watching it dance through cornfields, watching it cavort like a young dog. The cornfields fold up into a white stubbled quilt and the scene becomes a needlepoint sampler on the wall of another farmhouse, this one with two rooms and a plank floor pounded smooth by many generations of feet. Music is playing from a phonograph, bayberry candles burn, two lovers are loving on the bed, a four-poster bed — I add the fringed canopy — with a patchwork quilt, a green patchwork quilt. She is one of the lovers. The other is an amalgamation of the handsome man and the unhandsome man. As the lovers climax the man splits and becomes two men, splits again and becomes four, six, there is a miniature orgy happening now, and she is the center, young as she was never young, beautiful as she was never beautiful, thrilled and sated as she never has been, as she never even dreamed of being. The walls fold in, the bed folds up, the dream is a series of Chinese boxes and I tuck it away where she knows she can find it again, then I let her slip exhausted into beautiful true slumber.

I curl up about her feet, her warm feet, and relish the taste of her joy and my satisfaction. Gabs climbs onto the bed with me — she allows him in her bedroom now, there are little tufts of dog hair on the quilt, the pillows — crawls up beside me delicately on his tiny dog feet and curls himself into the crook of my knees. Christmas Day dawns and I blink happily at my own sentimentality.

But as usual my life begins to tell on her. She goes out less and less, her friends start to wonder about her. She still goes out now and then to the

ballet, the symphony, a movie if one of her friends is persistent enough. They think she's starting to get vague. But she's not. She's getting more precise. But only in her dreams. Her hair is now quite gray (I have only been with her two months) and her skin is lax and her teeth, her teeth give her pain. Not much, but little catches, little twinges, little oh mys in the middle of a salad.

Ah, but she sleeps so well now, I've never felt better, she says, over and over, whether they ask her or not. Her mind strays. No, not strays. Her mind is enticed away from its daily duties. Enticed by me. For me. It is working, but not on her friends, not on their babble, not on their prying phone calls or the maid's chatter or the doorman's good morning. It is busy gathering the raw stuff to build our dreams on.

This is the best time, for me and for her. Her dreams are intense now, wild and roaming. I feast. I grow fat. My jacket may not fit me when I leave. These dreams are the dessert for my efforts, the rich cream in the mousse, the fruit compote, the *kir impérial*. She forgets things, mutters to herself, leaves bills unpaid, dismisses friends' questions. She is enjoying herself very much. For the first time, enjoying her self. Because of the dreams. And I help her build them. I've taught her how to use them and enjoy them. She can't remember them when she wakes, but she knows they were there, and the mornings become regretful for her now. She sleeps more and more, wakes up tired, longs to rest, dozes and has fitful, appetizer dreams in the afternoon, in the evenings during television (these dreams have a bitter, metallic taste). Then at last back to bed with a welcoming sigh as the sheets slip about her and the pillow yields to her gray head.

I open my mouth.

She dreams tonight that she is scaling a mountain. She is weary and scarcely able to put one foot before the other, much less find the handholds and footholds she needs to keep from tumbling off the sheer cliff into the valley, the bottomless valley below. Luckily someone is above her, someone with a rope, the rope is tied about his waist and about her waist too. She cannot fall with him there. He is strong. His arms are thick. He is laughing and joking, she can see him laughing, though the wind whips his words away and she cannot hear what he is laughing about. It is her handsome man, with Paris about him like a fine cologne.

I hear her heart miss two beats. Race and miss a beat now. A beat now.

This makes me sad. Inevitable moments may still be sad. I have seen many many many, and I know. Sometimes I think the inevitable moments are the saddest of all.

They are just below the mountain's peak now. She is looking forward to pulling herself up on that sharp point. He has promised to make love to her there a mile above the world, to lie with her until dark, to lie with her as close to the stars as can be.

And he heaves himself over the top, and her hands so weary loosen and she will fall, but he seizes the rope and hauls her up beside him, into his big arms, holds her with his distinguished manicured Parisian hands.

So they make love, and night falls, and the stars are so close.

He takes her up in his arms and suddenly leaps from the mountain, right up into the stars. She gazes in wonder as they fly through the speckled sky, the spangled night. He turns her face to his, to kiss her, and she gasps. His face is now mine.

This is my doing. I am saying goodbye.

I kiss her. I let her go. She falls. She falls slowly, but she falls. I watch her fall.

I open my mouth and remove myself. My jaw clicks back into place. I rise from her bed. I turn back and gently rearrange her white hair, slightly damp, on her pale, translucent forehead. She breathes very quietly, so quietly that I have to put my ear on her mouth to feel her breathe. Her heart labors so, it cannot long continue. She is falling.

Gabs whines when I leave the bedroom but he does not follow me. He moves closer to her. To her breast. Lays his head on her breast. I wonder who will take care of Gabs.

I put on my boots and jacket. They feel odd to me now, like dead skin a snake tries to wriggle back into. They will limber up as I walk.

I look around. Beautiful apartment. More dust now than when I first came, the maid has been taking advantage of the lady's distraction. More dust now, a few cobwebs on the ceiling. And the drapes are open. Impressive view. Moonlight and neon and car headlights and shadows. Lots of shadows. Deep shadows, deep beside the light.





## **It makes sense**

Dogs don't think like human beings. This one was trying to. This dalmatian thought, in her canine way, that if she could think in a human way, she wouldn't miss people so much. This was logic worthy of humans, but experienced directly, without fearful prevarication, so it didn't achieve humanity.

She tried to stand on her hind legs. People did that. If she could only stand erect a few tottering seconds, she might think like people do. Did. Then they would still be, in a way, here. Then she'd know how to find food. Or how to open the door.



## The Gods Despise Themselves

Thor and Dionysos had at last set aside the inherent enmity of the determinedly masculine and the borderline effeminate. Every emotion withers when faced with eternity, and anyway, it seemed silly to argue when each had now only a few worshipers, and those few lacking the natural whole-heartedness of the past, performing their reconstructed rites with a kind of ironic ostentation that did not bespeak endurance. So their raging, baseless battles had degenerated into huffy shouting matches and then to sullen resentment, and finally to grudging pleasure in one another's irritability.

"What is worship, anyway?" Dionysos said. "Who needs it? Mindless, thoughtless habit on the part of mortals, born of fear of us and what we can do to them, and though I'm half mortal myself, I don't have much respect for the breed."

"Sour grapes," said Guanyin.

Her complacent smile raised the twice-born god's hackles. "You'll pucker your mouth around that bitter fruit eventually," he snarled with the standard contempt of the masculine for the true feminine. "Your little flock's shrinking by the minute. How long do you think they can hold out against the tide of modernity?"

Her complacent smile slipped into a grin of infuriating superiority. "I am not contrary to time or change. I am the eternity you fight against. When you're not pounding away at each other."

“Rot!” Thor barked. “You’ve grown as thin as we have these last few ages, starved for the smoke of sacrifice, and don’t pretend. If there’s one thing I can’t abide, it’s an immortal who won’t face facts.”

Dionysos snorted and raised his cup, the cup that never emptied. Thor acknowledged his salute and lifted his horn to his lips. The two, after all, had much in common, beginning with their prodigious drinking habits.

Guanyin had already drifted off into some other version of the Ultimate Reality, leaving behind the sweet perfume of jasmine. Thor spat and farted loudly. Dionysos gave a great laugh, then sank into anguished self-loathing. To this he’d come: from conqueror of India, harrower of Hades, to appreciative audience for Thor’s fart jokes. Eternity is too long, he thought, and Thor, with the merciless intuition of the gods, even the thick-necked ones, belched and said, “That’s damn true, damn true.” Dionysos closed his eyes in despair. Immortals enjoy no privacy.

“We two are eternity as well,” Dionysos insisted with something like spite. “Obviously. We’re here. We exist.”

“Of course we exist. Can’t *not* exist. What kind of talk is that?” Thor glared at him, perplexed. “We’re not like them. Mortals, I mean. They don’t really exist, not what *I* call existing. Everything they do comes down to that. Knowing they don’t really exist, knowing they won’t exist. It’s all pure fear.” He snorted. “Arrogant little bastards!”

Dionysos did not snort. Thor perhaps had never known fear, but Dionysos had. Often. That was the mortal half of him. He remembered the cold dread that had taken him when he sought his mother Semele in Hades, remembered it like the taste of blood. And he remembered especially the terror when he was ripped into a dozen dripping pieces, and remembered wondering, in the midst of that excruciating agony, Will I be after this? Will I still be? Am I really a god? Can I die?

Well, he couldn’t, and he was, so he should know better, the mortal fear should have faded then, beaten and torn out of him, dripped away like the holy ichor from his veins. But — let’s be honest now, self-deception is a contradiction of divinity — part of him was not convinced.

“Think I don’t know about fear?” Thor grumbled. “Don’t forget Ragnarok. Always have that hanging over our heads.”

“It’s not the same.”

“The hell it’s not!”

Dionysos watched with mute fascination the rippling of the muscles of Thor’s arm as he raised his horn again and again; the bobbing of his huge, divine Adam’s apple with each draught; the way hair rose out of the collar of his jerkin like a spume of blond sea spray. His own arms were slender as a boy’s, his chest smooth as the day he was born out of Zeus’s thigh, and his curly beard seemed pasted on below his rosy boy’s cheeks. He purposely did not acknowledge the mix of envy and desire and disgust that possessed him, and swallowed another healthy mouthful of unmixed wine.

These were thoughts Thor did not overhear, because he could not, would not understand them. Self-doubt was not in his makeup. Here was a trait he shared with many mortals, not that he’d admit it.

Dionysos looked around the Eternal Void. No one near. Most of the other immortals tended to avoid them, especially when he and Thor had been in their cups an eon or two. He didn’t blame them for that; there were many times he would have dearly loved to avoid himself. If only. There were times the loneliness of his immortality was a knife in his mortal belly. At least Thor was company, no matter how slobbering drunk he became. Thor had always been a sort of company, even when pursuing him, beating him, sneering at him, insulting him. Another remark that did not bear examination.

He sometimes wondered what the other immortals whispered about them out of his hearing. Eternity after all lends itself to gossip. But immortals must fill that endless cycle of days somehow, and all but the most rigid had already experimented with every variety of sexual congress imaginable (imaginable to immortal minds, more inventive than those of mortals). If he did catch the occasional rude chortle, he usually misinterpreted it, for it wasn’t caused just by his association with the big, brawny redhead, but by the two bibulous deities’ insistent denial of underlying sexual tension. He supposed that Thor, like all the rest, had enjoyed the odd dalliance with a pretty boy now and then, though the tight-sphinctered Norse bards would never sing of it. No point dwelling on that. So he never noticed the Norse god’s covert acknowledgment of his smooth skin, slender waist, and hairless yet muscular buttocks.

Dionysos emptied his cup and watched it refill. "What's worship, anyway?" he asked again. "What are the whinings of mortals to us?"

After all these millennia, Thor still wasn't sure what half the words Dionysos used meant.

"Why should we care?" Dionysos went on. "We were before they were, or most of us were. We'll be here after they're gone. What are they to us? And most of us, most of the time, pay no attention to them! Oh, every once in a while an immortal walks among them, meddles in their wars, drives one of them insane, sleeps with one who's particularly attractive or particularly available."

"Even sires a child every age or so," Thor said.

Dionysos's mortal half blushed.

Thor said, "Sorry."

"I'm not ashamed of it."

"No reason to be."

"All the mortal flesh has been blasted from me."

Thor eyed the way Dionysos's long neck met the curve of his collarbone. "Mm-hmm."

Dionysos became sullen.

"Buck up, boy. I was born of Earth, too."

Dionysos didn't answer. It just wasn't the same.

Thor had set down his horn to scratch his back and, reaching for it again, he knocked his hammer to what answered for "floor" in the Boundless Realm. Thunder roared across the tracks of space. Dionysos flinched.

"Sorry," Thor said again; and then, because he did not like apologizing, he swung the hammer loudly against the "floor" several times. A babble of protest arose from the outer reaches. "Quiet up there!" "Will you shut up?" "Drunken idiots!"

Thor tried to bare his backside to the babble, but he stumbled pulling down his leggings and fell flat on his back.

Dionysos shook his head. "Sometimes you really are an ass."

Thor, his drunkenness suddenly shifting from pugnacity to sloppy bonhomie, grinned and went to sleep, one huge hand tucked into his massive crotch.

Dionysos blinked. Why do they worship us? Fear. Fear, of course. The slob is right, everything they do is based on fear. Fear of getting hurt, fear of being hungry, fear of losing a loved one. Mostly fear of not existing. Not being. Silly, to be afraid of nothing. And they think if they don't pray to us, we'll forget them, allow them not to be.

A dim light flooded his inebriation. This is significant, he thought, this means something important.

The deep need in them to be noticed, noted, acknowledged. "Remember me," they always beg, among all the *give-mes* and *do-for-mes*. "Do not forget me." "I am here, really I am." "Keep me in mind."

"But," he said to himself, "if that's why they worship us, any of us, why, why would we . . . why would we who simply are . . . why do we bother . . . ?"

Thor shifted in his sleep, red mane tumbled around him, tangled in his beard, hiding his snotty nose and swollen, piglike eyes.

"Why?"

Because if mortals pray simply to be noticed, simply to tint their brief, pitiful lives with the lie of immortality, why do immortals listen? Why must we all listen? Always, eagerly, desperately listen? Dionysos felt a sudden panic in him, a panic similar to that he'd felt when he was ripped half-formed from his mother's womb and thrust into the wound in Zeus the Father's thigh. "Thor," he said quickly. "Thor, get up."

Thor did not get up.

"Thor." Dionysos suddenly needed company, needed conversation to pull his mind back from the idea that had peeked into it. "Thor, damn it, get up and talk to me."

Thor smiled in his sleep.

The twice-born's thoughts raced on in the eternal silence. Why are we obligated to the ceaseless chatter of things that exist for the merest beginning of a breath? And why, why do we grow thin, haggard, when the number of believers grows few?

"Thor!"

They want acknowledgment, the vain hope that they will always be. And we . . . ?

"Thor!"



"Let him sleep it off," said the musical voice of Guanyin. She was there again, a basket of fish balanced comfortably on her head, giving out a rich and disagreeably sobering aroma. "Why are you frightened?"

"Frightened! I'm not frightened."

"You look frightened."

"Well, I'm not."

Guanyin smiled. "Fine. I'm not used to seeing that look on immortal faces. I might very well be mistaken."

"Damn right." He grabbed his cup and drained it at one go. Raw white wine refilled it instantly. He drained it again.

Guanyin retained her smile despite the vulgarity. "You both make much fuss about the most fundamental matters."

"Go to hell."

"I am not of a tradition that requires hell," she said smoothly. "But you are young. Both of you. I sometimes forget that even gods can be young."

"I am not young!"

"That is youth's customary response. I have always existed, therefore I am old. You were born in time, therefore you are young. Listen, child."

Dionysos huffed.

"Listen, child. You will do well to learn something. Try to understand that everything that exists does so in a circle."

Dionysos had drained his cup yet again. His words were slurred. "What is that supposed to mean? Circle? What are you talking about?"

"And now I have broken my own rule against giving advice, which is always pointless." She sighed. "You needn't sit apart from us all, you know. You are always welcome."

Dionysos laughed. "Welcome!"

Guanyin sighed again and began to spin with consummate grace, until she was no longer visible.

Dionysos shivered.

Thor snorted, choked, opened one eye, reared up, and spat. He pushed out his discolored tongue and smacked his lips. "That was good. Nothing like a nap. My mouth tastes like a dead tribe. I need a drink."

Dionysos turned to him with wild eyes.

"Did I miss anything?"

Dionysos calmed. "No. Nothing."

Thor sniffed. "Smells like sanctity here."

"Never mind." Dionysos raised his cup. "Have one on me. To divine self-sufficiency!"

Thor frowned. Another long word he couldn't understand. But one excuse is as good as another. He raised his horn.



## Pangloss Triumphant

Two days after its eighth birthday, Cheryl Niederbaum's groin extruded a small penis and a delicate little scrotum. Cheryl played with her new protuberances for several days with no particular surprise. Then her mother noticed them while dressing her for church Sunday morning and became exceedingly pale.

"Mr. and Mrs. Niederbaum," said the doctor, "you have a healthy little girl who has suddenly become a hermaphrodite. I have no explanation." He toyed with Cheryl's genitals idly as he spoke.

"We've got to keep it a secret," Mr. Niederbaum said with Republican fervor.

"Of course," said the doctor. "I will give little Cheryl an assumed name when I publish my paper."

"It's the end of the world!" Mrs. Niederbaum shrieked.

Mr. Niederbaum put his arm about his wife protectively, but his arm was weak and damp.

"I wanted a little girl," Mrs. Niederbaum said stridently, "not a little freak!"

Cheryl squirmed. "What's the big deal? I think it's neat."

The adults regarded the child suspiciously.

It was a small penis by anyone's standards, but Cheryl, being the only girl in her school with one, did not feel any inferiority. When she was twelve and having her first period she also experienced her first nocturnal emission. Her mother wept with mad confusion over the stained sheets.

"Oh, I'll wash them myself," Cheryl said with rolling eyes.

"I'll do it," Mrs. Niederbaum said bravely. "I'm the mother here."

Only a few weeks later Mr. Niederbaum, in a fit of outraged conservatism, passed away. He was buried in an expensive casket with an intense scowl on his rouged and mascaraed face. "Daddy would hate all that make-up," Cheryl commented as she viewed her father's corpse. "He looks like an old queen."

Mrs. Niederbaum sobbed and pinched her to shut her up, but Cheryl said loudly, "Ow! Why'd you do that? He does!" and the priest, who knew about Cheryl's little secret from her mother's regular confessions, clasped his tiny fat hands and prayed in the approved fashion.

As the years passed, and despite her mother's desperate skullduggery, Cheryl became extremely popular with other girls and with a certain type of boy. She was not allowed to enter the Brownies, however. She learned to smoke instead.

Cheryl grew and grew, and Cheryl's little pecker grew and grew until, erect, it reached a respectable  $5\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Her breasts grew and grew until they reached a respectable 30 inches. "I am average in every way," Cheryl wrote in her diary. "But I guess if you put it all together you get something kind of different. Thanks, Whoever." Cheryl was not a conscious atheist, but being a new type of human being, she had necessarily developed a healthy agnosticism.

Cheryl dated regularly. Sexually she did not actually require the participation of another person, but psychically we all crave that heady kiss of alien flesh. It is the congress of minds and bodies that forms the healthy human; the first intoxicating interaction of form that forces the selfish mind to consider another's sovereign humanity. Cheryl, who had been forcibly thrust out of the usual round of excitation and repression by Dame Biology, groped her way easily to the natural conclusion that sex alone distinguished man from plant and that it was the most perfect experience possible, even when it was, as it usually is with unpracticed teens, pretty damned lousy. "How can people shoot and maim one another," she confided to her diary (volume four), "when it's so much easier to take them into your arms and give them a wet and juicy? I think I'm discovering something here."

She was, and gradually she convinced several of her friends of the rightness of her findings. She was expelled from parochial school in her fifteenth year.

It was when Cheryl was sixteen and performing a rather peculiar act, which she had perfected at the start of her puberty, that she impregnated herself. No one dared question her when she averred that she was the father of her own child.

Lady Gaga said, "I know what it's like to be different. I wish Cheryl all the luck in the world. She's going to need it."

Pat Robertson said, "This is a grave perversion of the Holy Word, and you all know what that means. I want Cheryl to come to me and pray with me for deliverance from her curse. If necessary, we'll lock ourselves together in a bare room for days to do what's right."

Oprah said, "This could open up whole new worlds of speculation for feminists and evolutionists, not to mention advertising. What do you think?"

The President said, "We need more mole missiles and I will fight to the death of everyone on this planet for America's right to defend herself!"

"This is too much," Mrs. Niederbaum said after 36 hours of televised shame. "You have consistently defied me in every way you could think of, and though you're my daughter and I love you, I can't take anymore."

"I ust i oo et alaw um ay oo ay," Cheryl said. She was eating a peanut butter-banana sandwich.

"You can't even disgrace us in the normal way! Ever since you were a kid," Mrs. Niederbaum panted, "ever since you were eight years old, you have lived only to make us miserable. You put your father in an early grave!"

"He put himself there. Stodgy old fart. I loved Daddy, he was a nice enough guy, but he just couldn't adapt. He was a dinosaur in executive clothing. He never could figure out chaos theory, either."

"No one can! Anyway, I'm not going to debate. I'm just telling you that from now on you're on your own. I'm leaving. You'll have to keep the house, at least for a while, I need the equity. I'm checking myself into the fourth floor of Hadley Hospital."

"Mother, you are always overdramatizing."

"I do not want to hear any of your rationales, young lady," Mrs. Niederbaum said sternly.

"Mother—"

"And quit patting your belly complacently!"

"Mother, I *am* complacent. I'm enjoying my pregnancy. I'm the most special person since God. Even He never got this much publicity."

At this Mrs. Niederbaum broke down and wept.

Cheryl sat beside her on the vinyl couch and touched her gently. "Mother, please don't crack up over this. Learn to enjoy it. We should be exploring this together."

"Don't touch me!"

Cheryl moved away. "Mother, you are so sexually maladjusted! Don't shake your head, I know who you voted for last election."

"Leave me alone leave me alone!"

"Well then, I *will* leave you alone." Cheryl stood and waddled toward the kitchen. "Go ahead, live the rest of your life in a little plastic room wearing baggy puke-green gowns and eating Jell-O! Be alone! It's all you deserve! You're so afraid of life you wouldn't know the sun if Carl Sagan didn't point it out to you on PBS! Come on, admit it, Mom: you've never even *had* an orgasm, have you?"

"Freak!"

"Jealous jealous jealous!"

"Freak freak freak!"

"Well YOU MADE ME!"

"Aieeee!"

"Oh, go away. I don't like all this negative energy you're spewing at me."

Cheryl marched into the kitchen with dignity as her mother called an ambulance. She began to cry. She put her head in the refrigerator to stifle her sobs, and did not hear the siren or the closing of the front door. Two months later Cheryl wrote in her diary (volume six), "Well, it's sad, but what the hell? Mom is probably happier than she ever was in real life, and I'm already over it. I guess. Oh God, the pains are starting! Aargh! Aargh!"

Cheryl had always wanted to do that.

Mrs. Niederbaum retired to her hospital bed and wore soft, loose clothing and was content — actual happiness is not a part of this equation. When Cheryl came to term she checked into Hadley also, into a room two floors below that of her mother. Mrs. Niederbaum was told when her daughter checked in, but she did not pay attention to the message. Mrs. Niederbaum could hear her daughter's screams faintly echoing from the delivery room, but she did not pay attention.

Cheryl delivered a six-pound-seven-ounce baby boy. The boy was a perfect white male child in all respects, but Cheryl was not downhearted. "I was eight before things started for me. We'll just keep our fingers crossed till then." She smiled at the cameras and brought her newborn's tiny fist up in a bye-bye wave.





## The Mind of God

The fibrous fungus *Gibellula polydactyla* is known by many common names: the Red Demon, the Sweet Cheese, St. Emilio's Pestilence, the Evangel. But the most common name is the Mind of God. The fungus is endemic throughout the tropic and temperate regions, although recently it has begun to extend its range even into the polar latitudes. The spores can remain inactive for years until they are disturbed. Frequent outbreaks have occurred in all eras, the most destructive in 1374-76, France; 1410-11, Germany, Denmark, Belgium; 1600-14, China, Korea; 1743, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan; 1772-76, Bolivia, Paraguay; 1787, Rome; 1839-42, Japan; 1914-17, Arabia; 1969, Patagonia. Earlier outbreaks, including that in which St. Emilio perished (c. 1100), cannot be attributed to the fungus with perfect certainty due to incomplete records.

The fungus propagates through spores which float invisibly in the air. If the spores are ingested through the mouth, they pass through the digestive system and are ejected without ill effect. But if they are inhaled through the nose, they will almost certainly germinate in the sinus cavities. After three days, the spores sprout into a mass of thin red filaments. During this time few symptoms manifest, other than a sense of congestion, with sometimes brief episodes of nosebleed. The filaments soon penetrate and migrate into the cranial cavity of the host, where they quickly weave themselves around the brain and form a thick web. Symptoms of this phase: sensitivity to light; a weak but persistent

headache, not alleviated by medication; a maddening itching in the sinuses.

These symptoms persist only one or two days. In the warm and humid medium within the skull, the fungus rapidly matures and begins to secrete a narcotic substance. In the smaller animals the resultant chemical reaction produces vertigo, panic, convulsions, even death; in humans, hallucinations, dizziness, feverish delirium, irrational euphoria, baseless sensations of superiority. The host experiences a conviction that the entire world is filled with divine intent, most often according to the dictates of whatever religion is dominant in the region; however, sometimes the patient fabricates a wholly new system of belief and superstition, a system frequently displaying the perfect semblance of inner logic. The most random event, the most uninteresting sight, inspires paroxysms of ecstasy. During this phase, which may last from a few days to several months, the patient, despite functioning almost normally for long periods, poses a severe threat to the well-being of others by falling victim to periods of confusion, fainting spells, and sudden seizures. The patient invests everything with a terrible significance, believes the most meaningless event to have profound importance for humankind, and should anyone defy this conviction, the patient may explode into terrific violence. If other infected people are in the vicinity, violence will often spread like a contagion, until an orgy of destruction occurs. The epidemic of 1209 among the Albigensians, which culminated in the massacre of the Cathars, was only one of the most virulent outbreaks. Other epidemics (1572, Lyons, France; 1857, Utah, U.S.; 1947, Lahore, Pakistan; 2010, Nigeria) also had effects with historical consequence.

It is in this phase that the fungus propagates. It causes fits of sneezing in the host, ejecting millions of spores that diffuse through the air to infect others. Speedy diagnosis is of course vital. Quarantine should be imposed. Diagnostic procedures entail blood tests and X-rays of the cranium. Treatment consists of a series of 14 to 20 antibiotic and steroid injections into the sinuses. Surgical intervention is rarely successful because of the deep intrusion of the filaments into the tissue of the brain.

Often treatment may be impeded if the patient refuses medical aid. The host believes that the illness is no illness, but is in fact a sort of divine gift, a visitation, and not only prizes it, but intentionally attempts to infect

family members and friends. Further difficulties arise if these individuals, for whatever reason, sanction the illness, guard the patient against the supposed threat of treatment, and support the patient's delusions. Doctors and nurses themselves may fall victim to the patient's delusions; professional staff must be aware of and guard against such so-called "psychological infection." Otherwise the fungus may reach epidemic proportions.

Following the propagation of spores, the fungus rapidly falls dormant. The filaments encasing the brain cease to produce the narcotic substance and rigidify into a hard shell. The patient's brain sometimes shows evidence of contraction, although normal functions typically continue. Some stray filaments may be ejected through the nose, mouth, and ears. Symptoms become milder, though they rarely cease entirely. Without further infection, the victim usually suffers no obvious after-effects. Occasionally the fungus is reactivated. Re-infection or reactivation is almost always fatal, because the brain contracts so profoundly that basic functions become impossible.



## **Just one thing I want to know**

“Just one thing I want to know,” shouted the manic character over the music. “Back before there were iPods, or CDs, or records, or even radio,” eyes wide, “back when if you wanted music you made it yourself or got up off your ass and by god heard it made right in front of you,” trembling fingers pass across forehead, “what I want to know is, did people hear songs inside their skulls all the time? Did they live with mental background music? Could they ever escape the music? That’s all I want to know,” whispered, “all I want to know.”



## The Limitless Library

With uncharacteristic humor, Grigor Przbewski filled out a calling card for a book that does not exist, and the book was brought to him.

Grigor Przbewski, a hack who passed his days in dusty libraries picking through dusty books and unreadable journals to find ideas for equally dusty and unreadable articles. Grigor Przbewski, a gray little man with gray little thoughts.

Grigor Przbewski was not known for his wit, but at the calling counter of the Duke Kambritzer-Bree Library he asked for the novel *Efebos* by the famous Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, the manuscript of which had been destroyed by fire in Warsaw during the Second World War. He had just read of it in a footnote and, perhaps to guy the obviously bored librarian, or perhaps to enliven, in his own peculiar way, an otherwise dreary afternoon, he wrote this title on the card. With a scarcely repressed smile he awaited the inevitable apologies of the librarian. But the librarian returned with a book. On the brown cover, in green letters, EFEBOS, and under this, *K. Szymanowski*.

Grigor Przbewski had much learning but little intellect. He knew well that this book could not exist; except for one chapter it had never been published, yet now he held it in his gray hands. He went to one of the long tables beneath a high window. He hung his coat from the back of the chair, arranged his satchel, writing pad, three or four pencils. He sat quietly for a moment to catch his breath. Then he opened the book and began to read. In fact, Grigor Przbewski did not completely understand



the miracle that had happened to him. And the novel was dull, obviously the work of a literary amateur, no master of prose. The plot was confusing, the characters embarrassing, the style stilted and precious. Without thinking deeply about it, Grigor Przbeński took up a pencil and began to write a review.

The review, which the editor of the magazine *Cadaver* thought a mildly amusing satire, was published. When he received payment, Grigor Przbeński for the first time pondered the strange thing that had happened, and a new thought pricked what for lack of a better word shall be called his imagination. He returned to the Duke Kambritzer-Bree Library, went to the calling counter, and filled in a new card: *Der Messias* by Bruno Schulz, a book that had never been written, only planned; a book that had never existed, not even in manuscript.

Five minutes later the book lay before him on the table. His review of this unknown masterpiece appeared three weeks later in *Głos*.

Grigor Przbeński now grasped that he had received a gift, a power that might satisfy his tiny dreams of success. He could actually read any book that had never been published. Grigor Przbeński, that gray little hack, was filled with awe: all the imagined literature of the world existed for him, and only for him.

With pseudo-scientific rigor he tested his hypothesis. At another library he slyly diverted the attention of a student at the calling counter and substituted his own card, upon which was written the title *Parnaso de Luís de Camões*. When the librarian returned and said to the student, "Sorry, no such book," Grigor Przbeński grinned and almost danced with glee.

At first he requested lost books, books that had vanished in the mists of time by accident, by disaster, by the stupidity of the authors' servants or spouses. At the Bibliothèque Française he requested *Les journées de Florbelle* by Sade and *Amasie* by Jean Racine; at the Gomper Library he found the *Memoirs* of Lord Byron, *Sanditon* by Jane Austen, a lost play by James Joyce entitled *A Brilliant Career*. In the library of the Universität Kiskunmanja he read the *Epigrammata* of Lukan, the *Medea* of Ovid, the *Odysseus automolos* of Epikharmos of Kos, and wrote a series of articles on the lost tragedies *Hermione*, *Inakhos*, *Niobe*, and *Thyestes* of Sophocles.

Grigor Przbewski now spent all his waking hours in the reading rooms of the various libraries. He offered to the bored librarians cards bearing fantastic titles: *Telephos* by Agathon, *Agatha* by Melville, *Emma* by Charlotte Brontë. And if he could summon up lost books, why not totally imaginary books? He began to invent titles: *A Madman* by Flaubert, *Penthesilea* by Homer, *The Complete History of Mu* by Gibbon, *Celibacy for the Modern Teenager* by Sartre, *Things Come Back Together* by Chinua Achebe, *My Mother, My Hero* by Elfriede Jelinek. And the books came. Later he dared to call for books by authors who had never lived: *War and Peace* by Karl Dissident, *Hamlet* by Anna-Marie Ceausescu, *The Second Sex* by Leonidie Beauvoir-Simone. And these books also came. No librarian questioned his odd requests, no librarian glanced twice at the strange titles. They took the cards, handed over the books, and immediately forgot both books and Grigor Przbewski.

For a short while his droll reviews of non-existent literature enjoyed the mild favor of the few intellectuals who bothered to read them. One foolish editor, in an effort to expand his subscriber list, even mentioned the name Przbewski with those of Borges, Wilcock, Buzzati. Grigor Przbewski dreamed of one day having a complete edition of his collected works published.

But the fashion soon changed. The magazines no longer welcomed such jokes.

Still Grigor Przbewski ran from reading room to reading room to seek out imaginary books. He gave up writing reviews that no one would publish. He read. But his reading gradually grew cursory. Then he called forth books and skimmed through the dream pages. Finally he simply called forth the books and sat before them, caressing their covers, flipping through the pages, stacking them in piles before him and staring at them with a gloating smirk. *The Acts of Solomon*, *The Gospel of Eve*, the *Juvenilia* of Rimbaud. . . .

Grigor Przbewski had not been a young man when this gift was visited upon him, and during his long hours in the libraries he aged rapidly. He forgot the intellectuals whose favor he had sought. He forgot the magazines and journals whose pages he had briefly invaded. He forgot the dream of an edition of his collected works. Adrift in a sea of unwritten words, he even forgot himself. Never plump, he lost his little paunch and

became thin, for words, though they may nourish the soul, do nothing for the flesh, and imaginary words even less. In his chair at the reading table, Grigor Przbeński lost himself among books that never were, among pages that had never been turned, among words never seen. His gray face paled, his gray hair turned white, and he sat, colorless, almost invisible, at the long tables in the big, silent rooms.

One evening, at the hour that libraries customarily close, a weary librarian was annoyed to find Grigor Przbeński at one of the tables. The old man's head lay at an odd angle on the tabletop. A thread of saliva stretched from his lips to the bare wood. His gray hands were folded possessively over a square of dust that lay before him, about the size and shape of a book.

## The Creative Process

"I still can't believe he did it."

"You of all people."

"Well, can you believe it?"

"Yes."

"Who could do such a thing?"

"I could. You could. Anybody could. It's the human condition."

"You and your human condition."

"You could kill someone."

"Never."

"Ho. But you can help him hide the body."

". . . We won't use that part."

"It's a story. We have to tell the truth."

"Not that much truth. We'll leave that part out. Now, how do we start?"

"With 'I can't believe he did it.'"



## **The Two Dear Ladies**

### *An Opera in Three Fell Acts*

“My dear Anna! Oh, it’s so good to see you again after . . . how many years is it now?”

“Too many, dear Margit. But you look just the same as always, you haven’t changed at all.”

“And you, as beautiful as ever. I was always jealous of your wonderful complexion. But come in, come in! Don’t stand at the door like a stranger. Come in! We’ll have a nice cup of tea and chat about, well, absolutely everything.”

“What a lovely apartment, Margit.”

“Thank you. It’s convenient. A little old-fashioned, but near the shops. Not as fancy as I used to have, back in the old days.”

“No? It’s quite fancy by my standards. Of course, I don’t often see such luxury.”

“Flatterer.”

“Not at all. I live quite simply. Quite simply. I never had your astonishing success.”

“Well, money comes, money goes. I also live simply now. My rich days are long gone. We’re just two old singers now, the world’s forgotten us.”

“Not you, dear Margit. Not you.”

“Oh yes, me too. The younger generation doesn’t remember us, certainly not an old mezzo-soprano, like me. If I’d been a soprano, like you . . . but, you know, I think I prefer being forgotten. I wouldn’t want anyone to see me now. Old, fat, hair gone gray. . . . But sit down, Anna,

dear Anna. No, not over there, sit here next to me. The light's better over here, and I want to look at you. My eyes, not what they used to be. . . ."

"And you've made tea."

"Yes. I have a maid three days a week, but not today."

"Oh, dear Margit."

"So I've made it myself. I hope it's good."

"Such delicate little cups."

"Given to me by the director of the Teatro la Fenice, after my Principessa in *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Such a sweet old fellow, so gallant, like all Spaniards."

"Here, I've brought you a little something."

"Oh!"

"Only cookies. I made them myself. I can't eat them, of course, I'm diabetic, but—"

"No! Diabetic?"

"Yes, Margit. But I enjoy watching others eat. Vicarious pleasure."

"Poor Anna! Oh, never to eat another cookie! I don't think I could survive such a catastrophe."

"Reason trumps appetite."

"Not for me!"

"I've become quite philosophical. One must, when one's life has been so . . ."

"You were always more intellectual than I. Yes, I've often thought so."

"Really?"

"Often. So, no sugar. Would you prefer lemon or cream?"

"Cream, thank you."

"You're thin, Anna. Too thin. While I . . . Well! The ravages of time."

"But really, Margit, you look just the same as . . ."

"When did we last meet? It's been, oh, more than thirty years, I'm sure."

"It was in Buenos Aires."

"Buenos Aires! Yes, you're right. Such a long time ago!"

"Yes."

"My Amneris. With the fat tenor, the little Russian . . . I've forgotten his name."

"Yavonivich. Yevgeny Yavonivich."

"You remember! You always had a wonderful memory. And you sang the Priestess. Ha! You see, I haven't forgotten."

"Neither have I. That was the performance that made you famous."

"Yes. . . ."

"Directly from the Teatro Colón to la Scala."

"Almost directly, yes. . . ."

"Yes."

"Those were heady days, Anna. The world opened its arms, and I did not hesitate, not a bit. I ran straight into those arms and never looked back."

"No, you didn't. And all because of Maddalena Natoli."

". . . Who?"

"Maddalena Natoli. Surely you haven't forgotten, dear Margit."

"No, no. Good heavens! I haven't heard that name in, oh, at least twenty years."

"And yet if she hadn't died . . ."

"Oh, please, don't remind me! The poor dear thing."

"Yes."

"Such an awful thing to happen. To die, just before an important performance."

"Immediately before a performance. Without any warning."

"Awful!"

"No warning at all. Fortunately, Margit, you happened to be in Buenos Aires."

"Pure chance, dear Anna. I'd just sung in Rio de Janeiro, Maddalena in *Rigoletto*. And my lover at that time . . . who was it? Jimeno, yes, handsome Jimeno . . . a baritone, no voice to speak of, but what a body. Truly heroic. Anyway, Jimeno and I decided to go to Buenos Aires before I returned to Europe, to visit you and my old friend Maddalena. Ha! What a coincidence! From Maddalena to Maddalena! I don't believe that had struck me before. Imagine!"

"Yes. Imagine."

"We'd scarcely checked in at our hotel when the telephone rang. Gambelli, it was Gambelli himself, demanding that I sing that night. How



he knew I was in Buenos Aires I'll never know. Well, it's all ancient history now."

"How he knew? But dear Margit, I told him."

"You?"

"Certainly. You'd telephoned me when you got in, for tickets. Remember?"

"Oh, yes."

"When we heard about Maddalena, Gambelli was going to cancel the performance. But I told him that you were in town, that you knew the role . . ."

"You remembered, from our student days."

". . . that you were a brilliant singer. Yes, dear Margit, it was I who told Gambelli about you."

"Dear Anna! And all these years you never said! Frankly, I don't remember that time very well. Everything happened too fast. Maddalena was such a dear, dear friend . . . to hear of her dreadful accident, and at the same time to have to decide to sing in her place . . . I only remember that I sang that night as if I were inspired."

"You, you sang as if you were inspired. And you left immediately after and forgot all about us."

"I never forgot!"

"No?"

"Oh, there's a crack in your cup, Anna!"

"Don't fret about that. . . ."

"No, no, give it to me. I'll be back in a moment. I should have seen, but my poor old eyes . . . This kitchen is really too small, well, the whole apartment is no better than a closet. But at least I own it free and clear. No one can kick me out. Here we are, a new cup, whole and uncracked."

"Thank you, Margit."

"And tea. And cream."

"Thank you."

"Tea, and cookies, and gossip between two old friends."

"Yes."

"Two old opera singers."

"Yes."

"You're living in Geneva now, Anna?"

"Yes."

"And you came all this long way to Rome, just to visit me."

"Yes, dear Margit."

"And your family . . . aren't they a bit afraid for you? An elderly lady, traveling alone?"

"I have no family."

"Tch tch tch. Well, neither have I. The opera was always my family. Father, mother, lover. But your friends . . ."

"No friends."

"Oh!"

"Just a few students."

"Ah, yes, you teach. I'd heard that. . . ."

"Now you're the flatterer."

"No, no, not at all. I still try to keep up on my old friends. You never forget the days of your youth, the hopes and dreams of those times. . . . Well. Buenos Aires. We haven't met since that sad time in Buenos Aires."

"Not since the funeral, no. But I'd forgotten. You weren't at the funeral, were you?"

"The funeral."

"Poor Maddalena's."

"No, no, I wasn't there. You know, I'd just received the call from la Scala."

"Ah, yes."

"Abbado called, Abbado himself, and of course I had to run."

"Of course."

"Such chances don't come very often to a young singer."

"No."

". . . These cookies are delicious, dear Anna."

"Have another. I love watching . . ."

"And let me pour you another cup—"

"No, thanks."

"No?"

"No. The tea is . . . pardon me, dear Margit, but the tea is a little bitter."

"I'm so sorry. If you could only have a little sugar. . . . I have to say, when you called, you could have knocked me down with a feather, I was that surprised. But very, very happy and pleased that you'd thought of your old friend."

"I often think of you, dear Margit. For many years I've thought of you."

"But what brought you to make this long trip?"

"Memories, of our student days. When we both dreamed of fame and glory."

"Ah."

"Memories. And the solution of a very old puzzle."

"Oh?"

"Dear Margit, I said I've become quite philosophical."

"Yes."

"The transitoriness of life invites such thoughts. The chances that come and go, chances that, for example, make one person successful and another not. When one is young and ambitious, one rarely thinks about anything but one's career, one's art. But later, when the career and art are over, when they've not turned out as one might have hoped, then one begins to ponder such things. One ponders the difference between appearance and reality. Being and semblance. I've always tried to look behind the pretty face of life to see what's really going on. Because appearance so often lies, don't you think?"

"How intellectual! I don't understand a word you're saying. I've often thought — not always, you understand, but sometimes, when your name has come up — I've often thought that intellectual attitude of yours rather restricted your opportunities. I'm more emotional, possibly too much so, yes, I know, but, well . . . for you, Berg and Schoenberg. For me, Verdi and Puccini."

"And Cilea."

"Hm?"

"Cilea. The Principessa. . . ."

"Ah. Yes. Of course, Verdi and Puccini, even Cilea, are performed rather more often than Schoenberg. . . . I'm no intellectual, no, I'm happy to say I'm not. I prefer intuition."

"You call me an intellectual. Well, perhaps. But not a deep intellectual. The profound thoughts of Descartes, or Sartre, or Heidegger remain outside my limited mental capacity. After all, I'm only an opera singer. Not even a famous singer, like you."

"Oh, my dear Anna . . ."

"But I prize thinking. Thinking is a duty, the duty of all human beings, don't you think? Without thinking, we are only beasts, emotional beasts. But because I'm no deep thinker, I also like puzzles. Mysteries. Even crime mysteries. And through all these years one mystery, one particular mystery, always haunted me. A mystery I experienced firsthand."

"... Oh yes?"

"Yes. The death of Maddalena Natoli. That makes you smile?"

"Only because you called that terrible accident a mystery. Poor Maddalena, she died horribly young, terribly suddenly. But it is no mystery. It was simply an accident."

"So they said."

"She fell from the balcony of her hotel."

"So they said."

"And despite this you insist on calling it a mystery!"

"It was a mystery."

"Was?"

"Was. The mystery has been solved."

"Has it?"

"Yes."

"How clever of you. But I still don't understand why you say it is . . . sorry, was a mystery, whether solved or not."

"A famous mezzo-soprano, alone in her hotel room, mere hours before an important performance, steps out on her balcony and somehow manages to fall. That doesn't seem mysterious?"

"The way you tell it, why, it sounds like a story in a magazine! But still only a story. Sad, yes. Mysterious . . . no. You've evidently read too many of those crime novels!"

"I only read about real crimes, not fictional ones."

"Do you have clues? Proof?"

"Proof is incidental to the thinker, and quite unnecessary. But yes, for those without imagination I have managed to get hold of proof."

"Evidently you're determined to show off your brilliance. Please, go on."

"Thank you. I have to confess, I am rather proud of my achievement. I began with the obvious facts. Maddalena went out on her balcony that afternoon. Why?"

"To enjoy the sunny day?"

"It was raining."

"Ah."

"And somehow she fell. How?"

"Everyone knew quite well that poor Maddalena . . . well, to speak candidly, she drank."

"After a performance, yes. But before? Never."

"No one knows what another does when alone."

"We all knew each other from school. You know she did not drink before a performance. It's unthinkable."

"Well, then, the night before . . ."

"She dined with friends the night before. I was there. She had no more than two glasses of wine."

"You're sure?"

"I remember perfectly. The police questioned me."

"With her friends she might not have indulged, but perhaps afterward. . . . Honestly, Anna, you're making me quite dizzy! Accusations, after so many years!"

"Accusations?"

"Well, if a crime occurred, someone must be accused. Right?"

"Very good, dear Margit. You're beginning to think like an intellectual."

"Never, dear Anna! I prefer my intuition, thank you. It's served me very well all these years. But go on, my dear. You've aroused my curiosity."

"I amuse you. Good. Well, I thought. For many years I've thought. I thought about many things. For example, I thought how a woman might fall from a balcony. Why? And I also thought, what if she didn't fall? What if someone caused her to fall? Understand, I was only thinking."

"Only thinking."

"I also thought, if someone caused her to fall, why would they do it? Why murder a well-liked mezzo-soprano? What motive could there be? Who could profit from such a terrible 'accident'? And then I thought of a man named Jimeno Santiago."

"... Did you?"

"Jimeno Santiago, sometime baritone."

"... Jimeno. My Jimeno. I'd forgotten his last name."

"Santiago. Where is Jimeno these days?"

"Where? ... My dear Anna, he was just a lover! An old lover. And I must say, only one among many. A lover for only a few days."

"A lover with whom you traveled from Rio de Janeiro to Buenos Aires."

"Well, for a week, then. But a lady can't keep track of every old amour. If you'd had lovers, you'd understand."

"I have had lovers, dear Margit. Not so many as you, perhaps, but then, I'm an intellectual, aren't I? But I've never had a lover who was executed."

"Executed?"

"Like your Jimeno."

"Dead! Poor Jimeno. ..."

"Executed, by the government of Brazil. The sentence was for ... murder."

"But however did you learn of this?"

"With a few letters, dear Margit. But they weren't important, they only verified my suspicions. Even without them, I knew. You see, I'd already considered the appearance and the reality of the case. You're smiling? This doesn't come as a complete surprise to you?"

"No, not as a complete surprise. Poor Jimeno! He was always hot-tempered. Imprudent. And so strong."

"Strong enough, dear Margit, to be able to pick up a mezzo-soprano and toss her off a balcony?"

"You have a terrifying imagination, dear Anna! And you insist on calling this accident a murder?"

"Yes. I call it murder."

"And Jimeno, dear Jimeno, the murderer!"

"Oh, Margit, don't let us play games. You know perfectly well what I'm suggesting."

"You accuse Jimeno?"

"Jimeno . . . and you."

". . . Me."

"Why would Jimeno murder Maddalena, except for you?"

"You accuse me. You believe, you actually believe, that I could have killed Maddalena."

"I do not believe. I know."

"And just to sing Amneris!"

"You were always impatient. And emotional. Maybe it was Jimeno who came up with the idea, and you impulsively agreed. Or perhaps it was your idea. That doesn't interest me. I don't care about the psychology of the criminal."

"But if—"

"Please, no games, dear Margit. At our age . . . You're smiling?"

"It's just that I agree with you, dear Anna. At our age, games are silly. Well . . . and now?"

"Now?"

"You came here only to accuse me, and now you'll go back to your poor, narrow little life?"

"Oh no, dear Margit. I came here in search of justice."

"Justice."

"Yes."

"After all these years."

"Justice never grows old."

"Unlike us. . . So, you will turn me over to the police."

"The police? Dear Margit! Do you think I'm so stupid? Do you think the Roman police would trouble themselves about an ancient crime that took place in Buenos Aires, a crime that no one even thinks was a crime? No. I have loftier notions."

"Loftier . . . Yes. Intellectuals so often have the most rigid ethics. You always envied me, poor Anna."

"No."

"You always hated me."

"No. But I've gradually learned to."

“ . . . Well. This little drama is no longer amusing.”

“No, dear Margit. The drama is over.”

“Exactly.”

“And again you smile.”

“You have your philosophy, dear Anna, and I have my intuition. I dare say intuition is better than philosophizing. At least it’s quicker. When you mentioned Maddalena Natoli, I immediately sensed what you were up to. So when I changed your cup, I wiped a bit of poison on the rim. Poor Anna, you’ll soon be dead. . . . You’re smiling?”

“Yes, dear Margit, I’m smiling. I also remembered your Principessa. Listen: When I finally realized what your Jimeno had done, I decided not only to tell you that I knew, which was my duty, but also to act as your judge and executioner, which was my pleasure. My cookies also contain poison. . . . You’re smiling?”

“You must see the droll side of our situation! So, we should call a doctor, shouldn’t we?”

“To fight for life at our age is simply indecent, dear Margit, and in any case will not help. My poison is too quick for that. You’ll be dead before the ambulance arrives.”

“My poison is quick, too. So, dear Anna . . . we wait.”

“Yes, dear Margit. We wait.”





## Our Cemetery

Our little town has one of the oldest cemeteries in the country, yet one of the most modern.

No mere cemetery, but a veritable necropolis. Our town was founded in 1642, and almost immediately the inhabitants started dying. The founders most wisely chose the summit of a high, wide hill to bury their dead. Others might have raised there a church, or the town hall, or even a mansion for some rich resident, would have hidden the cemetery away in some dark corner; but not our founders. They placed the cemetery proudly as near to heaven as possible, as if to say, Behold, these are our people, already halfway to the Throne.

Our town was and remains quite small, scarcely larger than a village. But we are all mortal, and through the centuries the cemetery has grown, and grown, till now it is as populous as New York, London, even Calcutta. But still it remains on the hill. It has not appropriated more territory unto itself, has not evicted the living to please the dead, yet quietly, calmly accepts all who demand entrance. How?

Our founders were wise men; their successors were no less thoughtful. They realized that our town was growing around the hill, that people die every day, that the cemetery hill was not boundless. But the sky above it, the depths below. . . .

Yes. With a magnificent leap of the imagination, those wise leaders decided that, if the cemetery could not expand outwards, it must expand downwards. So they begin to dig. They excavated enormous shafts and stacked the bodies in them like cords of wood, one below another, the

older above, the newer below, deeper and ever deeper. The earthworks attained vast proportions, incredible complexity. And our leaders' ingenuity did not stop at delving down: for the dead each need their own ineffaceable sign on this earth, their own stamp upon eternity. The headstones climbed upwards, one upon another like marble bamboo. Monuments became towers; mausoleums added chambers, storeys, became skyscrapers, till they stretched above the treetops, lost themselves among the clouds.

Scaffolding everywhere supports these structures both high and low like a spider's web, and through this metal fabric wind walkways for the mourners and visitors.

Some of the dead wait years for their place in this metropolis of death. Those still living pay fortunes, bribe bureaucrats, threaten officials to ensure their preference. Everyone wants to enter our cemetery, after their death.

The cemetery is, naturally, our biggest attraction. We locals are certainly happy that people wish to visit. We advertise, solicit, and many tourists arrive daily, promenade along the delicate walkways, stare, awestruck, up or down. It's true that after the funeral few mourners revisit the tombs of their loved ones. Visitors rarely return a second time. It's also true that we locals don't often enter the cemetery. We prefer to look at it from a distance, from the west bridge, from the cornfields across the river. When friends or relations visit and want to see the famous cemetery, we gladly lead them to the gates, but we wait outside. The necropolis is always full of people, living people, but it is always silent. The only sound in that place is the whisper of the wind among the stone spires, in the bottomless shafts.

The cemetery does not need familiar faces. The great towers pierce the sky, disappear in the clouds. The shafts descend, past the pale men digging, into blackness. The scaffolding holds all in its web. The dead lie dead, expecting nothing. The cemetery awaits everything.

## Something came between them

Sandra walked out of the room without saying a word. He hadn't really expected her to. He'd only hoped.

He studied the new growth that nestled now among the others — twenty? no, twenty-one. Some looked like fingers, reaching.



## There Are Smiles

Mr. Martin in conversation with Martin Jr.

"These grades just aren't up to your usual snuff, son. They worry me, they really do. I think I know you well enough to see that you're not living up to your full potential, and that's the biggest mistake anyone can make. Sit up straight, son, I've told you time after time how important good posture is. And look me in the eye. That's right. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. A steady, honest eye and a sincere smile, they're the greatest possessions in this man's world, I always say. Don't I always, Mother?"

The two Mrs. Martins, squatting upon twin footstools before the television, said, "Yes, Dad." They ate popcorn out of pink plastic bowls.

"That's what I always say," Mr. Martin said. "A good habit is a man's best friend."

"Yes, Dad," said the two Mrs. Martins.

"And if you think these grades are an accurate reflection of your potential, son, why then, all I can say is, you're lying to yourself. And that's the worst kind of lie."

"Yes, Dad," said Martin Jr.

"Not that I care about your getting the best grades, son. I just want you to live up to your full potential. You don't want to lie to yourself, do you, son?"

"No, Dad," said Martin Jr.

"Look me in the eye. That's right! That's an honest eye! And don't forget to smile." He smiled as incentive, baring the backs of his gums.

"That's a sincere smile! Now, I know it's sometimes hard to keep your mind on your books, so to help you out I'm going to make you a little business proposition: I'm going to give you ten dollars for every grade you raise on your next report card. Eh? Eh? How does that strike you?"

"Okay, Dad," said Martin Jr.

"That's my boy! Let's shake on it. That's what men do when they close a business deal. A good grip, son, will get you further in life than a solid gold Rolls Royce." He smiled, showing his white cheek bones like golf balls. "Harder, son, harder — good! Oh, I think you bruised me there!"

He laughed. The two Mrs. Martins laughed.

"Now you'd better hit the old books, son. I expect you'll just about clean me out next term, son! Just about clean out the old man's bank account!"

Martin Jr. went to his room.

Mr. Martin turned to the television. "Mother, why don't you pass me some of that good old popcorn."

The two Mrs. Martins handed him their pink plastic bowls.

Martin Jr. read his history and learned thereof. The Greeks conquered the Persians and the Romans conquered the Greeks and the Goths conquered the Romans and the French conquered the Goths and the British conquered the French twice and the Indians and the Africans, and the Germans made trouble and the Americans saved everybody. And the world was at peace and he slept a child's untroubled sleep.

Mr. Martin wore blue pajamas. When the moon was quite risen he entered his son's dark room and crept to his bedside. He put his arm around the boy's slender chest and pressed his wide mouth to his son's smooth ear. "Success. Success. Win win win," he whispered. "Success. Success. Win win win." His perpetual smile broadened and glowed in the curd-white light of the moon. "Success. Success. Win win win." He drew his sleeping son closer. "Success. Success."

"Sleeping like a baby," he told his wife an hour later. His sleeping wife moaned and stirred. "That boy'll be President someday, Mother." He mounted her briefly. She did not wake.

The two Mrs. Martins prepared breakfast. Martin Jr. ate a bowl of sugared oatmeal. Mr. Martin ate sausage and eggs. The two Mrs. Martins stood at the stove until the men left for school and work.

"Looks like Marty could use some more orange juice," Mr. Martin said. Mrs. Martin refilled her son's glass. "Got to stay healthy. Liquid sunshine makes a man fine. Mother, I'd like a little more coffee." Mrs. Martin refilled her son's cup.

"One of these days I'll take you down to the office, son. Show you how the money gets made. How the world spins around. What do you say to that?"

"Great, Dad," said Martin Jr.

"And this is our leader, Mr. Martin. Mr. Martin, this is my son, Martin Jr."

"Happy to meet you, son. Your father is the backbone of our great organization." He smiled, revealing the hidden muscles of his jaw. "I can only hope that someday you'll grow to be just like him."

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, sir."

"What are you studying tonight?" Mr. Martin said.

"Sociology," said Martin Jr.

"Good boy. Mother, would you please turn up the television?"

Martin Jr. read his sociology and learned thereof. The great earth mother with her wide-spread legs fell beneath the tight-lipped old god of Moses, who gave way to the heresies of the Gnostics and the Communists but found His way back to His throne on the backs of God-fearing Americans.

There was no moon, but Mr. Martin's wide smile glittered with its own light. "Lead lead lead," he whispered into his son's pink ear. Tiny drops of his spittle sparkled there. "Triumph. Triumph. Lead lead lead." He stroked the boy's long, thin legs. "Triumph. Triumph. Lead lead lead."

"Sleeping like a baby," Mr. Martin said to his wife. She was asleep in cold cream and curlers. Mr. Martin turned her over and entered her from behind. "He's going to make us all very proud someday."

The two Mrs. Martins prepared dinner. Black roast beef and white potatoes and yellow Jell-O salad. They kept their heads bowed over their plates as Mr. Martin said grace and explained the evening news. When



the food given by God had been consumed for the nourishment of their bodies they gathered the dirty dishes up in their arms and scurried back into the kitchen to wash and dry. Mr. Martin went to the family room and bit the end off a cigar. "Mother," he called, "is the coffee ready yet?"

"Yes, Dad," they said.

"And do we have those little butter cookies? The ones with the chocolate tops?"

"A whole box, Dad," they said.

Mr. Martin grinned to show off the gold fillings in his wisdom teeth. He turned on the television and climbed into his recliner. "Son," he said, "the world is a beautiful thing. If you live right, you can't go wrong. There's no excuse for disaster. Mother?"

The two Mrs. Martins appeared with coffee and cookies arranged tidily on a plastic tray.

"Mmm. These little cookies are good." Crumbs tumbled out of Mr. Martin's large mouth. "And some more sugar in my coffee, please, Mother. Thank you. Yes, son, chocolate is a beautiful thing. If you eat well, you can't get ill. There's no excuse for disease. Thank you, Mother, I *would* like a little more coffee."

Martin Jr. read his English grammar and learned thereof. Nouns floundered and drowned in adjectives and abandoned verbs pleaded but faded from active to passive constructions, while conjunctions covered in corners before marauding commas. Periods became extinct.

The quarter moon was hidden by clouds, but Mr. Martin had no trouble finding his son's unpillowed ear. "Own own own. Invest. Invest. Own own own. Invest. Invest." His voice trembled and his breath was quick and shallow. "Own own own. Invest. Invest." His fat fingers gabbled up and down his son's pale body. "Own own own. Invest. Invest." He carefully restrained a carefree chuckle. "Own own own."

"Snug as a bug in a rug," he said to his dark bedroom. The sound of his wife's gentle weeping was a ghostly echo. "You'll see, they'll be standing in line to shake his hand soon enough." He heaved himself into bed and knelt above his wife's face. "Get him a summer job at the office, that's just the ticket."

The two Mrs. Martins ironed and folded Mr. Martin's white shirts.

"Son, this report card is going to go right up on that wall in a plastic frame. Yes sirree bob. And don't think I've forgotten my end of the deal. Mother, will you please get me my checkbook?"

Mrs. Martin handed the hot iron to Mrs. Martin and fetched the checkbook and a ballpoint pen.

"There you are," Mr. Martin said after a ripping noise. "And I've got a special surprise for you, son. You're going to be working with me down at the office this summer. Just three days a week, so you can stay on your Junior League team. Not much pay, but it'll put some money in your pocket and get you started in business. Get you started in the real world. We'll go downtown tomorrow and open you a savings account. Mother, will you please bring me the knife?"

Mrs. Martin handed a wrinkled shirt to Mrs. Martin and went into the kitchen. She returned with a large, sharp butcher knife.

"Thank you, Mother. Come here, son."

Martin Jr. stepped between his father's legs.

"Now this won't hurt a bit, and soon you'll have a good smile. A nice, big, businessman's smile. A good smile is the greatest tool a man has. Now look me in the eye. That's my boy!"

He put the blade of the knife into his son's mouth and carefully carved a huge smile in his flesh. Martin Jr. screamed and cried and turned blue and streamed red.

"That's my boy!"

Martin Jr.'s eyes rolled back in his split head, and he tottered, but Mr. Martin's knees held him upright.

"That's my boy! A nice big smile, that's the key to all the right doors in this man's world. Isn't that right, Mother?"

"Yes, Dad," the two Mrs. Martins said.

Martin Jr. gurgled and gasped and clutched at his father's knees.

"That's my boy. Now give me a nice smile. Look me in the eye and give me a sincere smile."

Martin Jr. exerted all his energy and smiled. It was a vast smile, reaching from ear to ear, and threatened the unity of his face.

"That's my boy! Bigger than Mr. Martin's!" Mr. Martin chuckled.

"That's my boy!" He wiped a splot of blood from his creased trousers.

"That's my boy!"



## Footnote found in an old book

<sup>146</sup>The history of the 21st Century, with its series of ever-increasing ecological, economic, political, and cultural catastrophes, would be incomplete without mention of Dr. Stefan Udekirk as an example of the often baroque ideas that captured even the most intelligent during that period.

Stefan Udekirk (1979 - 2022) was one of the most famous scientists of his time as a result of his work in blood synthesis, through which he isolated, i.a., the viral agent of the purple plague, which killed millions in Europe and North America from 2013 - 2017. But in the years 2019 - 2022, in his laboratory deep in the swamps that had been the state of Virginia, Udekirk conceived a strange goal. Through his notes we learn that the good doctor was tormented by the suffering of animals, especially the suffering endured by farm animals. He clearly observed the exponential growth of the human population, and feared the increasing demand for food this would inevitably occasion. Others might have proselytized for vegetarianism, but the doctor evidently never considered this possibility.

At first Udekirk explored ways to increase the size of cattle, sheep, chickens, pigs, considering that if animals could be made greatly larger, fewer of them would need to suffer to provide the meat required by people. But the economic consequence of such a course is obvious: the amount of feed required by such over-sized livestock must make this plan unrealizable. Udekirk then sought means to make human beings smaller; if he could succeed in this, he reasoned, the growing population would need less food, and thus fewer animals need suffer. The results, as reported in

his notes, do not bear repeating. Finally (and one can only imagine the desperation that by this point had seized his brilliant mind), Udekirk mixed the blood of human beings with that of animals in a wild attempt to create a new breed, a hybrid species of human animals, or bestial humans. This despite the fact that theories relating blood to character had never been accepted by the scientific establishment and had at any rate long been exploded by genetic theory, a theory which Udekirk certainly was aware of, as he taught it to his undergraduate students.

How could a scientist of the first rank fall victim to such dementia? (In other ways he led a perfectly normal life during these years, attending conferences, teaching, editing widely praised papers.) Why did the authorities not investigate the many bodies, animal and human, stumbled upon in the bogs surrounding Udekirk's laboratory? (The political chaos of the period may explain, if not excuse, such a failure of responsibility.) And why did the corporations that funded his experiments not put a stop to his madness before the final catastrophe? (The general lack of scientific understanding and knowledge among even the most educated of his time may provide a clue to such negligence.) These questions draw a clearer picture of that miserable era than any bald catalog of statistics can.

We will not describe here the experiments Udekirk conducted. Through his notes we learn that they were of the most immoral nature, that he frequently used methods which can only be termed simple torture, including even vivisection. But through these disturbing records we begin to comprehend, in some small way, those motives which led Udekirk to abandon true science.

The good doctor did not wish to create an army of superhuman soldiers, like some mad scientist in a bad film. He did not wish to conquer the world, to reign as king, or god, over a dying society. He was not even trying to find a cure for some disease. At least, not for any *physical* disease. There was, of course, a disease the doctor wished to cure, but it was a *cultural* disease. We learn from his notes that Udekirk hoped, desired, madly *demand*ed, that the spirits of beasts and people be mixed so that humankind might finally understand, in its very blood, what it meant to be an animal. He expected that such knowledge would halt the terrible slaughter of animals and the thoughtless destruction of the environment by humankind. In fact, Udekirk, by his insane efforts, tried to force human

beings to develop empathy. Unfortunately (but as is common for human beings), he tried to create empathy by committing the most unempathetic crimes.

It is almost unnecessary to relate the dismal finale of his madness. The mutilated remains of Dr. Stefan Udekirk and two of his graduate students were discovered in his ruined laboratory. All the cages in the place had been torn open. Every instrument, every pipette, every beaker, every window and cabinet and bottle, were smashed. On the walls, on the floor, even on the ceiling were found the bloody prints of hands, of paws, and of something midway between the two.



## **O tempora, O mores!**

In our town, we open the doors at dusk and let the children out. Sometimes a little earlier, if it's cloudy. They are allowed to run through the streets for an hour or so. The older children mind the younger. They seize every experience they can, sights, sounds, the doings big and small that are always going on somewhere. When the hour is up, they hurriedly return to their homes, safe again in friendly darkness.

But nowadays some parents are mocking tradition. Some say, Why shouldn't our children see the light? Some open their doors too early, going against custom. I've even heard some allow their children out, secretly, while the sun's still shining.

Well, the times are always changing. And never for the better.





## Hurka and Aimun

Hurka was the strongest youth in his town. The people there still talk of the day he picked up a full-grown bullock and carried it from the stable to the house, all because someone had said it could not be done. He had thick arms, a deep and broad chest, and legs like the trunks of trees, and his laugh was like the booming of cannon. He was not a handsome man, but a fine-looking man, and admired by everyone who met him.

But though he was the strongest, and though he could run and swim like the wind, he was not the fastest. When the time came for the Great Games, he won all the feats of strength and hurling and wrestling, but came in second in all feats of running and swimming, always finishing behind a young man from the neighboring town. This young man was called Aimun, a solemn, slender youth with legs like willow switches and arms like reeds, a face beautiful as any girl's and hair that had never been cut. He looked as though a strong wind would bear him away, but when he ran he was graceful as any stag and faster than any hare, and when he swam he made the salmon stare with wonder.

The Games went on and Hurka bested all in wrestling, lifted greater weights, cast the javelin further than any other. But Aimun would not compete in feats of strength. He knew his powers and his weaknesses. He could run, and swim, and in these sports Hurka, who would admit no man his better, was proven second best.

When the Games ended, Hurka and Aimun had triumphed over every other man and were brought together to the platform to receive their prizes. The crowds cheered them. The Master of the Games set the

wreaths upon their heads. "Never before," he called out, "have only two conquered in all games. These are heroes indeed, and brothers in their triumph." Then he brought the two youths together to embrace. Aimun put his slim arms about Hurka and drew him close. When their breasts touched, Hurka felt rage grew in his heart like a thorned bush. But he smiled and put his thick arms around the boy and drew him close.

There was much traffic between the two neighboring towns, and Hurka saw Aimun often. When he drove his cattle to market, he would meet Aimun coming with his cart of melons, or potatoes, or a few sheep brought for shearing. Aimun was almost always surrounded by other boys, who followed their hero and vied for his attention. Every sight of Aimun and his friends drove the rage Hurka felt deeper into his heart, like a wedge driven into stone with hammer blows. But Aimun always smiled and waved to his brother victor, and Hurka of course smiled and waved in return.

A year after the games Hurka took a wife, daughter of the wealthiest man in town. She had hair black as the night sky, eyes deep as polished stone, and every man in town envied Hurka his good fortune. Hurka reveled in this new triumph. He looked at the rich gifts of embroidered cloths and copper kettles and carved furniture and two fine horses in leather harness, for riding, not for plowing, and he drank deep of the wine passed round, and when the dinner was done he took his bride into his house and made her know what a man she had married.

Then next morning he went to market in the neighboring town, and on his way he saw Aimun, and around him his friends playing at wrestling like children. Even in play Aimun would not wrestle, but clapped and urged on his companions. Then he looked up and saw Hurka passing by, and waved, and smiled, and called out, "Hello, brother!"

Hurka's anger sprang up anew, dug fresh thorns into his heart. What good was his wreath of victory, hung above the door of his house, when there was a man on earth who could boast of besting him? What good his beautiful bride, his rich relations, the fine furnishings, the two riding horses, when another man could say he had triumphed over Hurka?

When Hurka returned to his home in the evening, he called his wife to him and gave her love so harshly that she cried out in pain. But the image of Aimun rose up before his mind, and he fell back from her, unable to

continue. She wondered at this, and when she asked him his trouble, he moaned and left the bed.

From that day he had no peace, and kept away from his bride. Wherever he looked he saw Aimun's face, his weak, pale body, his mocking, solemn smile. When his wife called him, he turned away. When she laid her hand on his arm, he pulled away from her. She was first confused by this, then saddened. Then she became angry, and her words grew harsh. Hurka watched her love for him change into hate, but he was held helpless in the grip of his own hatred.

Between these two towns there is an abandoned well, given over by the people because its waters have grown brackish and poisonous. It is called the Well of Ghosts, because a foul mist always hangs over its rotting mouth, and some say that at night they see vague forms moving and marching around it, forms that glow with their own light. The well is only steps away from the road, but hidden by a grove of beeches, which grow crooked and twisted because of the poisonous waters that feed their roots.

Hurka began to neglect his work, and instead hide himself near this well, behind the beech trees, muttering and cursing to himself, waiting. He often saw Aimun go by on the road, but always the young man was accompanied by his friends, youths as puny and gangling as himself. Hurka cursed them under his breath, and when they were gone would storm and rage, pick up great stones and hurl them down into the well, ripping the stinking mist into tendrils that he inhaled like perfume. When night came he returned to his house, fed like a dog on the dinner his wife put before him in silence, and rolled himself into his bed without looking on her or touching her.

Then one evening at twilight Hurka stepped out from the trees and saw Aimun coming toward him along the road, and Aimun was alone. He pushed his empty cart, hurrying to return to his own town before night fell. Hurka stood silent, marveling that his moment had at last come. Then he called out, "Aimun!"

Aimun stopped. "Hello, brother!" he called.

The words turned Hurka's blood cold. It beat in his ears like the thud of broken ice on the river in winter. He heard himself say, "I've hurt myself. Will you help me?"

“Willingly,” said Aimun, and came close.

Then Hurka seized him in his great arms. Aimun cried out in surprise. Hurka lifted him up and carried him behind the trees. He wondered at how small and slim was the young man’s body. Why, he could squeeze the life from him without trying, or break him as one might snap a twig.

Aimun fought. He twisted, he struck out, but his strength was as nothing. Hurka carried him to the mouth of the Well of Ghosts and climbed atop the crumbling wall.

“Here is your reward for besting me,” he said. “Here is your reward for filling my mind with you. This well will be your arena, this wall of stones your victory wreath.” He lifted Aimun over his head to hurl him down to death.

But the stones of the wall shifted beneath Hurka’s feet and fell in pieces from under him. With a roar he tumbled with his burden into the well.

Down they fell, heads and limbs striking against the stones.

Aimun caught at the chasm walls until his hands, torn and broken, found a grip just before striking the bottom of the shaft. Hurka, stunned by blows to the head, fell to the bottom in a daze, and landed face down in a shallow pool of brackish, stinking water.

Aimun clung to the wall. His blood dripped from a dozen wounds. Hurka shuddered and turned himself over, feeling a terrible grinding where the two broken ends of a bone in his arm turned against one another. Aimun’s left leg was shattered and hung useless from his hip. Hurka felt a stab of agony when he breathed in. The noise of their breathing resounded in the well for long minutes. Then full night fell, and the deep well became dark as the pitch men use to seal their boats.

Aimun spoke. “Madman!” he said. “What possessed you to bring us to this pass?”

Hurka did not answer. In such pain, with the foul stench of the well in his nostrils, the rage and envy he had suffered so long revealed themselves clear to his eyes as madness indeed. He wept. “Forgive me!” he cried. “I have been mad, mad to hate you for your speed, mad to hate you for the prizes you won. Mad to turn my wife against me for that rage I nursed. I will die here in this foul place, but know I would give my remaining life to see you escape the fate I plotted.”

"Well may give up your rage now, you fool," Aimun said, "for my leg is broken and I'll win no more races. Die, and make that your repentance! But I do not wish to die, not I, though I go lame through the rest of my days. But how can I climb with my leg broken?" He reached to a higher stone to pull himself up, but his arms were weak and he slipped back.

Hurka raised himself to his knees, but cried out when he tried to hold himself up with his broken arm. "And I will no more be famed for my strength, with my arm broken and helpless at my side. And I cannot climb for its injury." He staggered to his feet. "But climb I will, for your sake, for I will set you clear of this terrible place, though my back break and I never see my wife's face again."

He stood and reached up, and pushed Aimun with his good arm so that Aimun could reach higher, and held him there until he made a grip on the slimy stones. So they slowly rose, with Hurka wedging his feet into the smallest crevices and pressing his broken arm to the stone wall despite the pain it gave him, to make himself firm so that Aimun might climb.

Then Hurka saw that a glowing mist had risen about them. The mist gathered itself into terrible forms, like monstrous men with claws and gaping mouths, like haggard crones with clutching fingers and savage smiles, like great hounds without eyes and tattered white birds that formed and vanished and formed again. Ghostly cries filled the well about him, and he felt his skin pucker and his hair stand on end for the horror of it.

The fear drained Hurka of his strength, but still he held fast to Aimun and pushed him up. "Catch hold!" he cried out. "Close your eyes to these devils and catch hold of the stones!"

Aimun's hands, torn and bleeding, lost their grasp, and the two slipped down. Hurka saw the ghosts howl about them, the spectre dogs snap at them with their vague mouths, the birds dive at them. "I cannot hold," Aimun said. "My hands have no more strength in them. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe."

"Look up!" Hurka said. "See there the sky above us! But a few more feet and we will be out of this hell and upon the earth again. Take hold of the wall!"

"I cannot," Aimun said.

"Then take hold of me!"

Aimun's hands wrapped around Hurka's neck. His broken leg beat like a rag of cloth against Hurka's back. Hurka drove his broken arm into the wall and climbed with all his last strength. The ghosts shrieked with fury as he climbed higher and higher. Aimun slipped down, but Hurka caught him, held him tight to his breast, and with a final mighty effort threw himself over the edge of the well with his burden.

"We are free, Aimun! We are free!" And he dragged Aimun away from the green mist that glowed above the opening of that cursed place. He dragged Aimun, limp and motionless, to the road, where he fell down and buried his head in the young man's breast, and knew no more.

People of the towns found them the next day. One of the men said, "They must have been set upon by robbers. Look at these terrible wounds!" Another said, "It must have been many robbers, for no one would dare attack Hurka single-handed." Another said, "How they must have fought for one another, see how their blood stains each the other's shirt."

Hurka opened his eyes. His first word was, "Aimun."

The men gathered round him, wondering that he still breathed. "Tell us what happened!" they all said.

But Hurka said only, "Aimun."

One man shook his head. "I am sorry, my friend. Aimun is dead. His flesh was cold before we found you."

They carried Hurka and the corpse of Aimun into the neighboring town. They ministered to Hurka's wounds and made him lie easy. But they took Aimun's body and they burned it, as is the custom there, and turned the ashes into the earth with spades.

Hurka's wife put aside her anger and came to him. She looked at his broken arm, now shrivelled and useless. She looked at his bleeding wounds. She saw him staring at the fresh-turned earth, the mud mixed with ashes. She said to him, "I will take you home, and there you will grow strong again."

Hurka said, "I will never be strong again."

"Stop looking at that dead man's ashes," she said. "I am here. I'm alive and breathing, and you are my husband."

"I am as dead as he."

“You’re not. You’re alive. You will come home and grow strong again, and we will make children together, sons who will grow up strong as their father, who fought off robbers to save his friend.”

Hurka stared at her wildly. “Go away, wife! Make your own sons, or get them from other men who can breathe without weeping at their terrible folly. For you will not get them from me.”

“You are alive!” she cried.

Hurka said, “My life is burned to ashes and sowed in earth.”

His wife turned from him and went away.

That night Hurka crawled from his pallet. He crawled to the place of fresh-turned earth, and he lay down there where the mud was mingled with ashes, and there he gave up his spirit so that it might return to the Well of Ghosts.





## Haunting

There was a man with a wife and four children. He loved his family greatly, so greatly that sometimes, at night, he lay awake for hours with tears in his eyes to think of how beautiful his wife was, how fine his children were, and how happy he was.

Then one autumn his wife and children were stricken with fever. And one by one they died.

The man died too, but he still breathed, and walked, and lived, after a fashion. He lay awake nights now and he thought how beautiful his wife had been, how fine his children had been. His family was dead, but he was the ghost.

On Christmas Eve he sat before a dulling fire and dreamed of what might have happened if? Then he heard a sound. He looked about, and found the shadows moving in the room. He listened closely, and heard his wife's dear voice. "My love," he heard her say, "we've come to wish you a merry Christmas."

For the first time since that autumn he felt his heart beat. He roused the fire to make the flames dance, and watched his family's shadows play games along the walls.

Now he was happy again. He sat before the fire every night, all night sometimes, and watched the shadows of his family and listened to their whispering talk. Then he began to sit before the fire in the daylight, to watch and listen. He began to fail in business, and he did not speak to friends, and he ate little, and less and less as the days passed.

A year passed in this way, and the man, whose hair had turned gray in that dread autumn, watched his body turn old. But he did not care. As long as he could put another log on the fire and hear his family, he was happy. And yet.

The voices of his wife and children grew distant. They spoke as always, but he had to strain to hear. He felt that they were moving away from him, far away down a dark road. And he hurriedly threw more wood on the fire and called to them, "Speak up there, John! Speak up, Melinda!"

That next Christmas Eve he heard his wife's voice say, "It's time for us to go, my dear. We should have left long ago, so long ago. We love you. Goodbye."

And the man called out, "No, you cannot go! Stay here by me! See, I've stoked the fire!"

But he heard his wife sigh, and behind her the weary weeping of his children.

"Now here, I've lit the lamp," he said.

"My dear, let us go," he heard his wife say. "You must let us go."

He fell to his knees on the floor and cried out, "No, I will not let you go!"

He heard his wife weeping now, as from a great distance.

"Let us go. My love, let us go."

He rose and threw more logs on the fire, until the stone hearth glowed and all shadows vanished from the room. And he sat down and said, "Stay here. I won't let you go. Stay here."

The fire fell, and the shadows moved back into the room, slowly as if exhausted, thin and wasted, bowed and crumpled. He heard his family whispering again, but this time all he heard them say was, "Let us go. Let us go."

He felt tears in his sore, sad eyes. But he kept the fire high.

## The Perquisites of His Position

Where does it begin? The boys or the girl? Toss a coin.

It begins here.

### I.

They were students together at college, took the usual business-management courses and bided their time. They all had well-to-do or wealthy parents who paid the way. There was Johnny Gilchrist, sandy-haired, ruddy-faced, thick-armed, with a two-room apartment on 17th Street near the campus. There was Steve McNally, who lived at home and cruised town in a restored '32 Chevy. There was Allen Perrie, tall and rangy, with a shy smile on his long face and a prominent bulge in his jeans, combination calculated to bring women to their knees. There was Curt Tantille, the youngest and blondest; he was the intellectual. He read books, went to the theater, even listened to classical music every once in a while. His parents lived in Mississippi and owned fourteen hotels.

And there was Broderick Heller. Brod was twenty-two, the oldest of the gang. Where perfect complexions and straight teeth were the norm, his skin was clearest and his teeth brightest. He was of medium height and build, with fine shoulders and strong, slim thighs. He had high cheekbones that cast wonderful shadows on his face, and his eyes were an icy blue fringed with dark velvet lashes. More than one girl had given herself to him because of his eyes.

And then, there was the money.

Brod's father was rich. He controlled Heller Enterprises, Inc. Heller Enterprises, Inc., held controlling interest in fifty companies and corporations and owned another twenty outright, directly or through a concealing growth of fronts and subsidiaries. Someday Heller Enterprises, Inc., would belong to Brod. He liked thinking of that.

Jessica Ashman wrote poetry, but she showed it to no one. She wanted to be the next Emily Dickinson, discovered as a genius long after her death. She composed her poems on yellow legal tablets and neatly copied them into bound volumes of blank rose-colored paper with a calligraphy pen and gray ink. She had, in her twentieth year, eight volumes of poems written in gray ink. The books sat on the top shelf of her bedroom closet, hidden behind a box of high school yearbooks.

Jessica had a square face pocked by old blemishes. Her hair was brown and straight and long; she kept it bound behind with a rubber band. When she was a child her mother had tied it with a pale blue ribbon. Jessica was overweight. The extra pounds made the curves of her body voluptuous, but her skin was colorless and her flesh too soft. She thought she looked flabby and sad, and walked with short steps to minimize her bulk.

It was on a Tuesday afternoon that Jessica saw Broderick Heller for the first time. He came roaring up the path from the gym surrounded by his boys, all of them red in the face from quick, cold showers. Brod wore a red sweater: he glowed with the heat of life. Jessica could see the flash of his straight white teeth from where she stood across the wide street.

All the boys talked at once. The tall one, Allen Perrie, laughed. Only Brod was silent, smiling, amused. They hit the sidewalk and paused a moment, which way to go? To the student union for sodas or into town for beer? And as they stood there, Broderick turned his gaze upon the girl who stood frozen across the road, textbooks clutched to her heavy chest. The sunlight shining low over the fields struck his blue eyes at an angle and turned them silver.

Jessica held the look a moment, kitten caught in a car's headlights, then blushed fiercely and stumbled away with her funny walk.

Brod turned back to the boys. "Into town for beer," he declared, and they fell behind him naturally, carried out orders promptly and with the unthinking good humor of lesser corporate executives.

"We'll take Steve's car," he said.

"Yo bo," Steve said. Allen went out for the pass, Steve tossed him the keys, and they ran to fetch the car.

Other students on campus called them Brod's Bully Boys. The boys laughed when they heard it, and Brod smiled pleasantly, a sharp flash of white between his lips.

They drove to Magoo's and took their usual corner table. Curt headed for the pinball machines, and Allen flirted with the waitress, who ignored him. Brod ordered a pitcher; the waitress served him before she waited on her other tables.

"New graffiti in the john," Steve announced on his return from the toilets. "Second stall. 'Kim T. sucks like a Hoover,' and there's a phone number."

"Probably a guy," Johnny said.

"Oo, call it, call it!" Allen cried.

"Your quarter," Steve countered.

"Your finger!"

The others crowed.

"Whatcha thinking about, Broddy?" Curt said.

Brod lit a cigarette. Curt shrugged and turned back to the pinball machines.

Brod studied the tavern and noticed a cheerleader cuddled in the corner booth with her football-player boyfriend. Brod caught her eye — he did other things in the next twenty minutes: smiled, glanced at her secretly, smiled again; that was all that was needed.

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Steve moaned when he realized what Brod was up to. The others looked up, leered at each other, and, one by one, left the table. Steve tossed his car keys to Brod.

The boys clustered around the pinball machines. Curt plunked in a quarter but, busy watching the action, he lost his three balls. When the football player went to the john Brod inclined his chin and the cheerleader came to him.

The boys watched, breathless.

The cheerleader spoke. Brod spoke. The cheerleader spoke again, Brod nodded and stood. They left together in Steve's car.

"Fucking amazing," Curt said.

"Guy's incredible," Steve said.

Allen whistled and scratched his crotch.

When the football player returned, zipping up his fly, he looked around, puzzled, and the boys snorted.

Brod drove to a vacant field just outside of town. It was a cool night, and when the wind rose it was chilly. The girl hugged her goosebumps and snuggled close to Brod.

Brod shrugged her off his shoulder and switched on the stereo. The girl pressed closer. He pushed her away.

"Hey," she said, and half-laughed.

"Get out."

He said it calmly, a vague smile on his face. He did not look at her, but stared straight before him at the night outside the windshield.

"You gotta be kidding," the cheerleader said. But her voice was unsteady.

Brod said nothing.

She laughed. "God. They said you had a crazy sense of humor." She laughed again and stroked his shoulder. When he did not respond she pushed her hair back behind her ear petulantly. "But I don't think it's funny."

Brod still said nothing. He studied the dark beyond the headlights.

"I said I don't think it's funny," the cheerleader continued. Her voice rose shrilly. "As a matter of fact, I think you blew it. Okay?" She glared at him furiously. "I don't think you're gonna get what you're after, not tonight, okay?" He did not answer. She puffed with rage. "So you just rev up and get me back to Magoo's pronto, *Mr. Heller!*"

Brod slowly turned his face to her and regarded her coolly. He smiled and leaned toward her.

She clenched her teeth and sat bolt upright, determined not to give in, at least not immediately. But Brod reached across and jerked open the car door.

The cheerleader's mouth dropped.

"You son of a bitch, this isn't funny."

Brod thumbed up the volume on the stereo.

"You think just because you're kinda cute, just because you're *Mr. Broderick Heller*—"

Brod lit a cigarette and inhaled until the tip glowed brilliant red. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and casually dropped his hand down to the seat, close beside her thigh.

The cheerleader gasped, jerked away, and stared at him with wide eyes. Then she clambered out of the car and stood there in the night, shivering, eyes fixed on Brod.

Brod smiled, flipped the volume all the way up on the stereo, and reached across the seat to slam the door. He roared off, leaving the cheerleader open-mouthed, trembling in a thin sweater and facing a two-mile hike back to campus in a pair of brand new boots. When Brod walked back into the bar, he bought the football player a beer. The boys grinned.

Later they flopped in Curt's living room in front of the television. Curt cussed at Allen for spilling beer on his new stereo. Brod lay on the sofa, boots off, stockinged feet propped on the cushion behind Johnny's head. He said — quietly, he always spoke quietly — "I'm out of cigarettes," and Steve and Allen ran to whatever place was nearest and bought him a pack of Kools.

"You're still thinking about something, Broddy," Curt said. He raised Brod's can of beer and slipped a week-old newspaper under it with a quick "tsk."

Brod smiled.

Jessica discovered his name by listening to the other girls talk. Broderick Heller had a reputation on campus, especially among the women. She listened to the gossip about the fast cars, the family fortune, his appalling success with women — not only other students but even members of the faculty. She listened to all this, and made it the scripture of her new religion.

Jessica bought another book of rose-colored paper, another bottle of gray ink, and two new yellow legal pads. The new poems were written quickly with almost no revision, and at last she abandoned the yellow



legal pads and wrote directly into the book. She felt, for the first time in her life, inspired. Her poems, formerly long, quiet rambles among gentle metaphors, became short-lined, jagged things full of strange images, flowers compared to broken brick buildings and songbirds to factory whistles. Jessica felt a new excitement while writing, an excitement that drove her dangerously near happiness.

She lay in bed, twin bed without a twin, in the three-room apartment that was the lower floor of an old house on Jewell, and touched herself and thought of Brod. She had followed him about the campus every day for a week. She knew now where he lived, what car he drove, where he ate, when, which bars he favored. She even followed him to a dance: she put on a dress and bought herself a ticket, just to see. It was the first dance she had ever gone to. She watched Curt dance with a pretty girl; watched Brod tap Curt lightly on the shoulder; watched Curt grin and leave them together the entire night, until Brod grew bored and ordered the boys away from the party.

She knew his body well, she had seen him almost naked when he played an impromptu game of basketball in the gym and ripped off his T-shirt, soaked with sweat. Thinking of him like that, touching herself, Jessica felt an almost painful warmth, a frightful clutching in her belly, dim contractions that grew stronger and stronger. Terrified, she jerked her hand away. The spasms faded little by little, and she was left weak and clammy.

She drank a cup of tea, and then she brought out a box of blue stationery and wrote a love letter to Broderick Heller. She did not sign her name. She addressed a blue envelope, folded the letter neatly and slipped it inside, and placed it atop a short bookcase near the door. She had no intention of mailing it.

A week later she had written a second letter. When she had finished the third she held it in both hands and wept. With the fourth her handwriting had become angular and ran crookedly up the page.

Now, lying there in the night, she could feel the tightness build within her, and she did not have to touch herself to bring the heavy warmth, the painful, delightful spasms — she had only to think of Brod standing shirtless in the gym, sweaty in the gym, intent, intense, and the loud

boom of the basketball as it drummed on the gym floor, but not so loudly as the blood drummed in her veins.

She wept without reason. She could not sleep, she could not eat, she lost seven pounds and even that did not interest her.

Then one morning, scarcely aware of what she did, dangerously aware of what she did, Jessica wrote, scribbled another letter on the blue paper, stuffed it into a blue envelope, scrawled the address, licked a stamp and slammed it askew on one corner, ran down the street to a mailbox and hurled the letter in, shoved the letter in, flushed it down, before she could stop herself. She stared at the mailbox as if it were some monstrous serpent. Her eyes were wide and glassy.

She walked slowly back to her apartment, tumbled into the bathroom, vomited. Her belly heaved dry for two hours until, at last, exhausted, she fell asleep on the tiled floor. It was the deepest, purest sleep she had ever known.

After that she wrote and mailed a letter to Broderick Heller every day.

## 2.

Brod read the letters with an emotionless grin, white teeth just visible between his full lips, and handed them over to the boys. They laughed and jeered and tried to guess who. Alone, each of them fantasized about the letters and wished they had been written to him. Together, they spoke of nothing else. Brod never took part in these discussions; he looked away, bored, until the boys noticed and changed the subject.

One day late in autumn they went to the student union cafeteria for Cokes. Jessica Ashman sat at a corner table hunched over a jumble of notebooks. Her face blanched when they passed her twice, and flushed when they sat only two tables away. She could hear Brod's voice. She could hear Brod's voice as he made plans for the weekend. He ordered Steve to get his father's Cadillac, they would need a big car. She listened, entranced, terrified, until the cold in her throat met the heat in her belly and drove her to her feet. Hands shaking, she gathered her books, took a deep breath, and steadied herself to walk past him.

She took a step. See how easy? Another, another, confidence mounting now, nothing to it. She could walk by him and he wouldn't even notice

her. She could do a can-can around his table and he'd never even blink. Another step, another. Easy as pie. He didn't even know she existed. She was invisible. Another. She was a shadow in the room cast by a greasy smear on the windowpane. Another. Another. Easy. So easy!

She was at his shoulder when she slipped on an oily napkin squashed on the linoleum. She skidded about, slammed into an empty table and sat down with a thump. Her notebooks scattered everywhere. From one of them slid a blue envelope.

Curt bent to help with automatic courtesy.

And then Jessica forgot to breathe.

And then Curt picked up the blue envelope.

They recognized it instantly. Curt chucked in his breath, looked at Brod then back to Jessica.

Brod had already seen and understood. He stared into Jessica's gray eyes — locked on his own in a fierce gaze of wonder and terror — and saw something within them that he could make use of.

"It's—" Curt whispered, but Jessica snatched her books out of his hands and ran from the room, ran out the door.

"Her," Johnny said.

They sat stunned, fantasies crumbling. Then they began to laugh.

"Her?"

"Jesus!"

"Did you see!"

"Oh my god, her!"

"Shut up."

Brod said it very softly. The boys fell silent instantly. Curt hiccupped. All looked to Brod and waited for their cue.

Brod turned to Steve. "Forget about your dad's car this weekend."

Steve swallowed a chuckle. "Okay. Why?"

Brod stood and left them. For once they did not follow. He walked to the glass door, it was still swinging, and went out.

The boys looked after him, then at one another, then at the table.

They did not see Brod in the next week. Curt asked about him once; the others kept quiet, sensing danger. They drove around town and spoke

of other things, drank beer, hollered at girls. All that week they felt a breathless relief in being away from Brod. Freedom. But they also felt a lowering pressure: there was a crackle of mounting static electricity in the air, a growing odor of ozone, the smell of a storm racing toward them from across the fields.

Then Brod called Johnny. It was Friday afternoon, late, just before dark.

“Yo Johnny.”

When Johnny heard Brod’s voice he closed his eyes and let out a rush of air.

“Yo Brod. Where you been?”

“Get my buddies rounded up and come over to the Motel 6 on the interstate. You know? Room 117.”

“What—?”

“Just do it. Eight o’clock. Wait, make it nine. Sharp.”

“Hey, man, I’m supposed to—”

But Brod had hung up.

Johnny closed his eyes again. Fucking arrogant bastard. I got a date tonight! What am I supposed to do, drop everything when you say Boo? Shit!

He pressed down the receiver, picked it up, dialed Steve.

They gathered in the parking lot of Motel 6, three cars — Curt had bummed a ride with Allen. They noticed Brod’s fire-red Jaguar parked across the lot near the drive. “Quick getaway,” Curt joked.

“So what kind of party’s this?” Allen said. He’d been drinking, they all had, but he spoke softly.

“Shit,” said Johnny, and he spoke quietly, too. “Sometimes I get fed up.”

Curt hiked up the sleeve of his jacket and checked his watch. “We’re early.”

“Fucking fed up.”

“Who’s got the brew?” Allen said. Steve tossed him a can of Bud from the six-pack in his car.

“Something better happen soon or I’m off.”

"Almost nine," Curt announced.

"Hey, man," Steve said, "you mean you got somethin' better to do than trot after Brod Heller?"

"Fuck," Johnny grunted, and popped another Coors.

"Right," Steve laughed.

"Well. Brod," Allen said, as if that explained everything.

"Yeah, Brod."

And of course it did.

"Here we go," Curt said. "Eight fifty-nine and forty-eight seconds, and counting. Ten. Nine."

The boys joined in chorus, "Eight, seven, six, five . . ."

The door to Room 117 slapped open and Brod appeared, his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his tanned chest. The boys glanced at one another, felt their stomachs clench.

"Going to stand out here all night?"

Brod smiled. They joined him.

"What's doin', Broddy?" Johnny asked, but he didn't smile. Curt smiled; he couldn't help it, seeing Brod's grin.

"Party time," Brod said. "Don't fret. Jessica Ashman, femme fatale, waits within."

Steve gaped. "Shit, man!" he hissed. "You brought that cow to a motel?" There was contempt in his voice, and envy. They all heard it, and they all understood.

"Don't talk like that."

Brod's voice fell suddenly serious, and they would not talk like that again.

"Well," Johnny said, "you know, whatever's kicks, Brod. So what do you want with us?"

Brod smiled and stepped aside.

"Come in."

The wind died, the clouds braked above.

"Come in."

The wind rose again, the clouds slammed and pounded. The night turned chill.

"Come in."

Curt broke the circle and stepped inside. The others followed slowly.

\*

Jessica Ashman stood in the center of the cheap motel room. She wore a blue dress covered with frills and flounces that made her look heavier than she was. Her hair was braided with blue ribbons. Her cheeks were red with rouge, her lips were bright pink. She had painted her short, ragged fingernails.

Jesus, Johnny thought, she's all dressed up for a date. He knew suddenly what had happened in the past week: the baiting, the bizarre courtship, the brief, commanding phone calls.

Jessica stared at the boys. She forced a smile. The smile dipped uncertainly.

"Brod?" she said.

He did not speak. The boys suddenly understood what he wanted.

"No!" Curt said, and stepped back. But the door was shut behind him.

"Unh," Allen grunted, "unh."

"Brod?" she said again. A manic light of fear and adoration glittered in her eye.

"I told you what I wanted." His voice was the smoothest the boys had ever heard. He might have been making a speech before his father's board of directors.

"Brod?"

"I told you what I wanted, and you said yes."

Curt rocked back against the closed door. "I don't want to be here," he whined. Allen grunted again, "Unh." Steve swallowed twice to keep something down.

"Christ, Brod, what the fuck." Brod silenced Johnny with a look.

Well, things like this just don't happen, Steve thought. Oh, you think about it, get yourself all worked up late at night, when you wake up hard. But it doesn't really happen. It couldn't really happen.

The room swayed around Allen. He canted sharply and grabbed for Curt's shoulder.

Curt did not move. He was staring at the girl.

"I love you, Brod," the girl said.

"You said yes. I told you, and you said yes."

She looked as though she would cry. That made Brod smile again. She looked at him, then raised her hand to the zipper of her dress. When she was naked she sat on the bed, legs tight together.

"Now," she said. "Please."

He shook his head. "Not yet. The others first."

Her glance darted about the room, trapped.

"The others first. Johnny, then Steve, Allen, and Curt. Then me. Not before."

"I love you, Brod."

Brod said nothing. The boys caught at their breaths in the stifling room. Johnny took a step forward, toward her, unconsciously.

"No!" she moaned, but choked back the cry. She was sobbing now. Her eyes swelled red and she became ugly.

"I love you, Brod. I really do."

There was no backing out now. No opening the door. There had never been a way out, really, not since they first met Brod, not since they fell in with him and rode with him and did whatever he told them to do. And now they were listening to this girl with her pathetic makeup slipping down her sweaty cheeks, listening to her say "I love you" as they had never heard it said in the movies.

Brod nodded to the boys. They glanced at each other and, one by one, unzipped. Not one of them thought he would be able to, but of course they could, and they did, growing fervor at the awful excitement of lying atop a woman who looks at someone over your shoulder and says to him, again and again, "I love you. I love you." First Johnny, and he was surprised to find that she was a virgin, but he soon took care of that. First Johnny, then Steve, then Allen, then Curt.

And when Curt had finished and zipped up and joined the huddle by the door, blushing, a puzzled expression on his bland, clear face, then Jessica's eyes opened wide, for it was Brod's turn.

Brod did not move, and they wondered, would he wait until she begged him again? But at last he unzipped and went toward her. He still smiled his corporate, "good-man" smile. He didn't touch her. No. He stood over her and had his fun and never touched her. And even as she realized what he was doing, and cried out with frustration, hurt, and anger, and despair — reached a shaking hand toward his thigh and saw

his leg moved out of reach; even as she sobbed and choked and snuffled and blinked, she screamed with the force of her orgasm.

They left separately, went to their different homes, got drunk or stoned in their various ways, and somehow slept.

Three days later the girl who lived above Jessica in the old house on Jewell noticed the rising syrup odor. She found Jessica's body lying naked in the bathtub in gelling maroon-brown blood, the arms sliced from palms to elbows, an ecstatic smile contracting slowly over dead teeth.

## 3.

Johnny opened his apartment door and winced at the smell that rushed into his face. Jesus God, what was it? Maybe the toilet was backed up. He'd bawl the landlord out for that, the bastard said he fixed it the last time. But it wasn't the toilet: the water was clear and at its usual level.

The phone rang. Steve.

"Johnny what are we gonna do?"

"About what?"

"Shit, you didn't hear? She's dead! She slit her wrists!"

The world went black and white. "Ash—?"

"Who else, fuck! I'm freaking out, Johnny, totally freaking out!"

"Shut up!" The line became quiet except for Steve's heavy breath. Johnny leaned against the wall for support. "How'd you find out?"

"The paper. But it's all over campus."

"Did she leave a note?"

"I don't know!" Then Steve realized what it meant if she hadn't, and calmed. "Oh. I don't know. No, she couldn't have, they would've—"

"Shut up." So we're off the hook, Johnny thought. "What about Brod?"

"We couldn't find him. Curt and Allen are over here." He panted even more heavily. "You want to come over?"

"Where's your mom?"

"Out! You think I'd call with her listening in the kitchen? Shit!"

"Let me talk to Curt."

Scuffle of the phone changing hands.

"Johnny?"



"Has that asshole been drinking?"

"We all have. I plan on getting totally blitzed, totally. Come on over, we've got two bottles of cheap scotch. Wild night!"

"Shape up!"

"Shape up yourself! Hell, we just— we just—" He almost broke down, then grunted back into control.

Johnny felt tears sting his eyes. "Don't get like that, Curt. We don't have to panic."

"Oh hell no! We just—"

"We just nothing! She was crazy. Everybody knows that. Hell, she had to be crazy to—"

"I don't want to talk about it I don't want to talk about it! I just want to get drunk and stay drunk a long, long time."

"Get drunk and talk too much?" Johnny hissed. But Curt had dropped the phone. Steve took it up again.

"Are you coming over or what?"

"Yeah, yeah. But go over to Curt's place, for God's sake. Before your mom gets home."

Mumbled conversation.

"Curt says not his place. Stinks to high heaven, sewer must have backed up. We'll be at Allen's."

Johnny frowned, then dropped the thought. "Okay."

"Should I bring the booze?"

"Yeah. God, yeah."

They weren't able to reach Brod. No answer at his apartment, no one knew where he'd gone. Fuck him. Thanks, Broddy. Trust you to see us through, Brod.

They all got drunk and played Allen's Van Halen collection over and over. Steve left first, "Mom'll worry." Curt wouldn't go home; he stayed with Allen. Johnny left his car at Allen's and walked back to his apartment. He was too drunk to drive even a few blocks, and he couldn't chance a wreck, he couldn't handle that.

It was two in the morning when Johnny started home, but it was not dark. The moon was full and the sky was chrome. It was cold. December was so close. Final exams and parties to go to. Love a party.

A tree whispered to him, "I love you."

He spun around. No one.

He started again, in the wrong direction, hey, cheap scotch'll do it every time. He found the right direction and soon his apartment building was there, brightly lit with slashes of spotlight, slits on the red brick wall, wrists might look like that, he mused, shook the thought away fast. He was conscious only of feeling tired and bruised, and he wanted to pass out on a soft mattress with sheets that hadn't been changed in so long that they smelled the same as he.

"Johnny, you were the first, I love you."

"Hunh?"

He couldn't have heard it. The opening of the glass door had made a noise, an indistinct succession of meaningless tones. He was drunker than he'd thought.

The elevator doors opened. Johnny fell in. He punched the button for his floor and leaned back against the wall. He glanced up at the convex mirror in the corner.

A face looked back, a square face, scarred from pinched pimples. A face just turning green. The thick lips, no longer red, opened and whispered, "Oh Johnny yes you're so cute, so gentle, make it good, you're the first."

He caught his scream just in time.

The only face in the mirror was his own: wide bloodshot eyes and dangling mouth.

He pulled open the elevator doors and stumbled down the hall to his apartment. He fumbled the key, dropped it, stooped, picked it up, fitted it into the lock, and swung the door wide, noticing too late the stench of rotting meat that oozed into his nostrils. He reached for the light switch — he wouldn't walk into a dark room, no way — and soft, water-puffed fingers closed over his wrist, pulled him in as the whine spiraled up his throat; another puffy hand closed over his mouth to stop the scream, and spongy, slimy lips came to meet his, whispering, "Not like the first time, Johnny, this time only for you, let me make it good for you, kiss me, Johnny."

He stopped thinking, but somewhere deep inside his mind were the words “I’m sorry” and “I didn’t mean it to happen.” And “Kiss me.”

The door swung to behind him. Wild night.

Six weeks later.

Steve lay on his rumpled bed and stared at walls covered with posters of rock and movie stars. His stereo played early Simon and Garfunkel softly: he was in that kind of mood. Rather, he was in no mood. He was blank. Empty.

Mrs. Gilchrist, Johnny’s mother, had called Steve when she couldn’t reach Johnny by phone. Steve called Allen; Johnny’s car was still there. So Steve checked Johnny’s apartment and found him sitting dead on the toilet. The doctors said sudden stroke. Stroke? At twenty-one? Johnny, tennis player, five hundred sit-ups every morning and arms like a weightlifter’s? Hereditary, they said. His father, overweight, bald, smoking like a chimney, died of a stroke at the age of forty-seven. Oh yes, it all made perfect sense.

“Knock knock.” His mother entered Steve’s room. Steve did not look up.

“Why don’t you come downstairs and sit with the family? Grandma and Grandpa have barely seen you all Christmas vacation. They’re leaving tomorrow.”

Steve rolled over, picked up a copy of *National Lampoon*.

“You’ve been holed up in this room so long it smells.” She moved to the window and raised it, then raised the storm glass. Cold wind blew in.

“It’s *cold*,” Steve whined.

“Maybe it’ll freeze you out of this room!” She bit down the harsh words and spoke again, gently. “Honey, I know it’s been rough on you. It was horrible. Horrible. But you’ve got to come out of it sooner or later.”

He threw the magazine to the floor.

“Why don’t you call one of your friends?” She spoke brightly. “Curt, or Brod?”

Brod. Where was Brod? He hadn’t even come to the funeral. He hadn’t taken his finals, either. He had disappeared. Vanished like a bad, bad dream. Well, good riddance to the sick son of a bitch.

The record ended. He reached to flip the disc over. His mother sighed loudly and went to the door.

"I will expect you downstairs in five minutes," she said, and left the room.

He glared at the open door a moment, then spun the volume knob up full. Music shook the walls of his room. He strode to the door and slammed it shut, then crossed to the window and slammed it shut, too.

Fuck the smell. He was beginning to like it.

On New Year's Eve they gathered at Allen's. Curt was still there: he would not go back to his own apartment. He slept on the couch, and made a lot of long distance phone calls to his parents.

They drank Coors chased with Gordon's gin. Heaven help my head in the morning, Steve thought.

"Your mom didn't mind you coming over?" Allen asked.

"Hell no," Steve said. "She's glad to get me out of the house. They're having a party and she knows I'll get drunk. Better than having me upchuck all over her fancy friends."

"They'll be doing enough of that themselves."

"I should have gone home for Christmas," Curt said, more to himself than to them.

"Right, you should have," Allen grunted.

"Put on some music," Steve said. The television was on, the ball was sliding lower into Times Square, but they'd turned the sound down. Party noises from other apartments came muffled through the walls.

"Ten nine eight." Allen said.

"Seven six." That was Curt.

"Five four three two one." And that was Steve.

"Happy New Year."

They all swilled.

Allen toasted. "May the best of last year be the worst of the next."

Steve stared at him a moment. Then his lips crinkled up, and he laughed. Allen laughed too. Finally even Curt laughed. Their laughter sounded hoarse and unreal; it was the first time they had laughed in almost two months.

They got very rapidly drunk after that. Steve toasted “Lovely women I have known, and those I’ve yet to meet.” More laughter, a bit hysterical now. Curt raised his bottle and said, “And to absent friends!” They drank to that. As he raised his beer Steve thought, Maybe this is it. The peak. Maybe we’ll be all right now, after all.

One by one they passed out. They slept on the couch in a tangle while *Soul Train* played on the silent television.

Steve woke to Curt’s hysterical screams.

*“In the bathroom! In the bathroom!”*

Brain like a Brillo pad, Steve struggled up to consciousness, flailing wildly, confused, terrified, expecting nuclear holocaust. Allen was already on his feet, frozen with eyes wide.

Steve focused on Curt. The boy was on the floor, back pressed against the wall beside the open bathroom door. The bright bathroom light sliced the gloomy dawnlight of the room.

“Shut up! Shut up!” Steve yelled automatically. Curt kept screaming, incoherent now, voice high and squealy as a child’s. Allen did not move. Steve tumbled off the couch, grabbed Curt by his rumpled polo shirt, and slammed him against the wall. Curt stopped screaming, then grabbed Steve and hugged him fiercely.

“Jesus, she’s in the bathroom!”

Steve shook him again. “You’re crazy!”

“Go look! Go look!”

Steve let him go. Curt fell back gasping, scuttled to the couch and attached himself to Allen.

Steve faced the bathroom door, a rectangle of blinding light, and suddenly was certain that, yes, the gas-bloated, half-rotted corpse of . . . her . . . was indeed within, perched on the toilet like absent friends, ready to take him into her cold, strong, stick-like, wormy lover’s arms. He could almost hear her moan with moist lust, “Yes, you, Steve, not the other, that was a mistake, not yet. No, this time it’s for you, only and ever you.” He could see, from the doorway, the shower and the sink; but the toilet was hidden behind the door. Around that corner, he knew, was the thing

that shouldn't be above ground. He could smell it. It was the same smell that filled his room at home.

He entered the bathroom.

He thundered back into the living room. "You stupid shit!"

Curt's eyes bugged. "But I saw—"

"Go to hell!" Steve screamed. He grabbed his throbbing skull with both hands. "Just go to hell!"

He ran out, found his car, sped away toward home weaving back and forth across the center line. "He's crazy!" he yelled at the windshield. "He's lost his frigging mind!" he laughed at the blinding white sun just rising. "Crazy! Crazy! Crazy!"

He swerved suddenly to avoid a car in the road and just missed a parked car. "Fuck," he said, shaking, but he did not slow down.

"You've got to drive more carefully, lover."

Coaxing, seductive voice, heard before in dreams, filled with the promise of oh god such gut-wrenching pleasure.

"Because later, Steve, what I will give you! Later, when we're all alone."

He must not look in the mirror. He must not scream. Four more blocks, then upstairs, lock himself in his room.

"When we're alone."

Alone.

Pencil fingers, brown and crumbling at the tips, the nails long and soft, touched his neck, caressed the sensitive flesh behind his ears, and he screeched, yes, like a little child, Curt would have been proud. He shrieked, he screamed, he had an erection, god help him. He looked in the mirror.

The car hit the curb, bounced back across the street onto a patch of ice where it did a Peggy Fleming turn and slammed rear-first up a light pole. The heated metal sparked as it rode up the pole. The gas tank was shoved down, crunched down, it shrieked like Steve, and burst. The car exploded.

They swept up Steve's remains when the wreck had cooled and dumped them in a heavy rubber bag.

Happy New Year.

First Johnny, then Steve, Allen, Curt. And then Brod.

Allen and Curt huddled together like refugees in Allen's apartment. Curt would not use the bathroom — he washed at the kitchen sink and pissed there, too. He used the toilet at the Texaco station on the corner. He hadn't bathed in three weeks.

"I feel like the last man on earth," Allen said. "You should go back home to your folks. At least you'd save on all those long distance calls to mama." Allen felt he had a better grip on reality than Curt: he did not remember Johnny's or Steve's deaths.

"I *want* to go home," Curt said. He was eating a Swanson's chicken pot pie. "But I'd have to go home alone."

"At least go over to your place and get some fresh clothes."

Curt shook his head. "Smells."

"Damn it, it smells here, too! And it's probably just *you*. You stink."

Curt took no offense. "Not me. You know who it is."

"Bullshit."

Curt looked up from his pie. He said, very matter-of-factly, "I saw her, but it wasn't my turn yet. Has to be done in order."

"I won't listen to you."

Curt shrugged. "If you won't face facts . . ."

"Don't talk to me about *facts*. Steve was right, you *are* crazy. I won't listen to you."

Curt went on eating. Allen listened to him chew. He turned on the television. Curt picked up his tray with the pot pie and took another chair, his back to the television.

"Why don't you watch TV?" Allen growled.

"I don't like to. Sometimes I see reflections on the tube."

"Crazy."

Curt finished the pie, carried the empty tin to the kitchen, threw it out. He rinsed off the fork at the sink, refilled his glass with soda, and returned to the living room.

"If it's in order," Allen said suddenly, "then what are you afraid of? You won't go till after me."

"If I go home, I won't know when it happens to you." So logical.

"You're a goddamn ghoul."

"Listen, I don't plan on waiting around for her to come after me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. But I'll take care of it, when the time comes."

"Fucking ghoul."

Allen watched television late into the night, long after Curt fell asleep. He woke at noon the next day. Curt had covered him with a blanket.

"Want some toast?" Curt called from the kitchen.

Allen scratched his rough chin. "Turning into a regular hausfrau, aren't you?"

"You want it or not?"

"Yeah, yeah."

He ate the toast and drank coffee. On his second cup he said to Curt, "So how come, if it's true — *if* — how come she" he had trouble saying that word, "how come she wants us?"

"Classic revenge motive." Curt sat down opposite Allen with a ham sandwich for his lunch. "Most popular plot from the Greeks to the Elizabethans to E.C. horror comics and splatter movies. Revenge."

"What revenge? You sound like Rod Serling or somebody. Revenge, bullshit! She *wanted* it buddy! You heard her beg."

"I heard her beg, but not for me." Curt was so damned precise. He spoke like one of their teachers. "He forced it. And she was so nutso-wacko that she let him. Warped. We wronged her, and now she wants revenge."

"*You're* warped. Jessica Ashman, that cow! She's *dead*. Buried and rotted down to the bone."

"No, not yet. It'll take a long time before she's down to bone."

Allen pushed away from the table.

But it was always there. Underfoot. Peeking around the corner. They returned to it, circled it, like buzzards testing something dying in the desert.



One night, weeks later, Allen sat staring at nothing. Curt read a comic book, the lamp by his chair the only light in the room. The bathroom door was shut.

Allen said, in a low, barely audible voice, "Johnny really did have a stroke, sitting on the john, jerking off." He made himself laugh. "It could be that way. Hereditary heart condition. It could have happened."

Curt did not look up.

"And Steve just hit a patch of ice. It could be that way."

"Yes," Curt said, "it could."

"So we don't *know*. It's been so long since Steve . . . since Steve, you know. What does that mean, huh? What does it mean, that it's been so long?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know! I thought you were the goddamn expert! This is my *life* we're talking about!"

"Mine, too," Curt said.

"Revenge, bullshit! I'm sick of it. Not one of us wanted it to happen."

"Doesn't make any difference. We did it."

"Fuck you. It was *him*." He was silent. Then he said, "If it's revenge, he'll get it too, right? After you?" He managed to grin. "That's good. That's good. I can stand it then."

"Do you know," Curt said, smiling, but not at Allen, "it was my first time?"

Then one night Allen woke to whispering at his ear, so near he could feel the breath warm as rancid beer. It said, "Allen, I love you, Allen. Let me touch you. Oh Allen you're so big. You were the best, Allen, you were the only one, it was you you you."

His eyes jerked up like old window shades. The room stank. Had he been dreaming? Of course not, that would be too easy.

He woke Curt, shook him roughly.

"What—?"

"Get up. We're going to your place."

"I don't want to."

"Shut and put on your pants, goddamn it! We're going to your place. You're going to shower even if I have to climb in with you. Get up! Get up!"

But it met him at the door. Stink of dead meat rotting away. A smell growing clean.

In Curt's refrigerator was a square of cheddar cheese, green and puffy; also a bottle of Diet Pepsi, long flat, a quart of milk, now cottage cheese, and a box of Cream of Wheat. But there were cans of pork and beans in the cabinet above the stove, and tuna, and peas, and even Campbell's Chili Beef.

"Okay, I'm ready." Curt entered the kitchen, naked, as Allen dumped the chili into a pan to heat.

Allen undressed and they showered, the radio in the living room turned up loud and who cares if the neighbors complain? Then they sat naked in the kitchen and ate soup and soda crackers, and Allen opened the can of tuna and ate it straight out of the can, though Curt commented rudely.

Curt unfolded the sofa-bed, got a blanket from the closet in the bathroom (He's trying, Allen thought), and they lay in bed, all the lights off except the one in the kitchen. The room had a ghostly, unreal luminosity. The corners were black and fuzzy as old bread. The street lamp outside sent light through the venetian blinds and made bars across the wall and door opposite them.

Curt fell asleep. It was four in the morning. Allen's thoughts were rambling and he was close to sleep when a voice came to him. Not a woman's voice. A man's.

"Hey, buddy! Don't try to run, believe me, it ain't worth the trouble. Just give in. You know it's over, right? Relax and enjoy the ride. Hell, you won't believe what that girl can do. She is fantastic. Totally unbelievable. Like no one you ever had before."

"Johnny?"

He sat up. The room was empty, but it buzzed with echoes just faded. He hit Curt.

“Christ, not again.”

“Wake up!”

“I want to sleep.”

“Wake up wake up!”

“What?” Curt forced his gluey lids open. “What?”

“I want to go out. Let’s go somewhere!”

“We just got *here*. I have to sleep.”

“You’re the one who’s been scared of his own shadow for two months, you shit! Let’s go get breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry. I’m sleepy. I want to sleep.”

“Sleep later!” Allen got out of bed, found his jeans and put them on. “Then just stay by yourself! I’m getting out of here!”

He couldn’t find his sweater, he’d had it earlier, where had he dropped it? He couldn’t find it. He threw shoes, scattered *Playboys*, tossed Curt’s ugly mismatched dirty argyle socks. “Where’s my sweater? Where’s my sweater? I’m hungry, I want to go away. I want scrambled eggs, *where the goddamn fucking hell’s my sweater!*”

Suddenly he was crying. He stood, his back to Curt, and covered his face with both long-fingered hands. He sobbed.

Curt watched, tears in his own eyes.

“It’s started,” Curt said. Statement. No room for lies.

Allen nodded, mute.

Then, exhausted, he stopped crying. He turned to Curt. Curt folded back the blanket. Allen crawled in beside him, three years old, and they clung to one another until the sun came up. But the sun didn’t help.

They went out for every meal, saw movie after movie, even managed to sit through one of the basketball games at school. Friends came up to them to say Where have you been, everyone’s been asking. But they saw the drawn faces, the bruises under the eyes, hair untrimmed, uncombed — and they went away without speaking. My God, they said later, They look like they’ve seen a ghost.

Oh, more than one. Once Allen went into the bathroom at Arthur Treacher’s Fish ‘n’ Chips, and they were there: Ashman, naked, pelvic girdle thrust saucily through the remaining flesh of her hips; Johnny,

whole but green, bloated, grinning like an idiot, "Come on in, man, she is something else! The things this gal knows!" And the other one, black, shrunken, silent, pieces missing, leaving a trail of soot and ash on the smart white tiles.

Another time, buying popcorn at a double feature of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *When Worlds Collide*, Allen dropped his money into a hand suddenly bony and mildewed, and looked up to find that the cute, dark girl with the big tits behind the candy counter had become shriveled and dried and was terribly smiling, giggling rustily, "Not yet, Al, Al just a little longer, make it last a little longer."

Allen gave up, ran, abandoned Curt in the dark theater with the flickering lights. Drove out of town, just to get away. Raced past fields and gas stations. Realized the futility, realized it was too late, it was too late when Brod said "Not yet." Felt the earth heavy on him, as if he were already dead and in the hole. Turned back to pick up Curt.

Curt stood bewildered in front of the dark movie house where he had waited two hours. He didn't know what else to do.

"Say goodbye to me. So you'll have said it, if there isn't time."

"We're really crazy, aren't we?"

"Say goodbye."

"It's like we're in a glass bubble, cut off from whatever's happening, really. And the glass is dirty and smudged."

"Please, say goodbye to me."

"Goodbye. Oh God."

"I don't believe in God anymore."

"Oh yes, there's a God. Or this wouldn't be true."

"It's true?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

On a brilliant day of glassy yellow sunshine on crusty snow, Curt nerved himself and went out alone to the A & P.

Allen stayed in the apartment, relishing the privacy and terrified of it. First he used the toilet and left the bathroom door wide open, the way he

liked it. Then he did two hundred sit-ups, fast, and rubbed his fingers over the muscles of his gut that had almost melted away. They felt good. He dumped the trash down the hall incinerator, came back into the apartment, flopped on the floor, and lazily played with himself while he waited for Curt to return with vanilla wafers and chocolate milk. That would taste good.

The phone rang. He answered it, expecting his mother.

"Hey, buddy, how you doin'?" said a voice too familiar. "Been lookin' all over for you."

Allen's throat went dry and he gave a dusty moan.

"Hey, bo, somebody here wants to talk to you."

Allen hung up.

The phone rang again. He let it ring. It rang twelve times, then stopped. Two minutes passed in jittery silence. Then the phone rang again. Allen picked it up.

"Not nice, good buddy, hangin' up on your friends. But I forgive you."

Allen did not speak. There was a noise at the other end, the phone changing hands.

"Allen?" And he knew that voice too, but now it was charred and fragile and passed tortuously between broken teeth.

"Allen, don't be scared. It's not as bad as you think. Hell, I know how you feel, I thought I was going nuts. But she is something else. Nothing like her, you can bet money on it."

Noise at the far end, the first voice returned.

"It's true, buddy, this lady is wicked! She knows tricks that'll straighten your curly hair. Not to be believed!"

"Shut up shut up shut up," Allen whispered. He slammed the phone down with both hands. He watched it, but it did not ring again.

"Where's Curt?" he said to himself. He paced the apartment and stopped once on every lap to peer out the window. "Where's Curt? Where's Curt?"

He noticed, but did not admit, that the stink in the room had grown, was growing, was more vile than ever before. The greatest rot before the final dissolution.

The phone rang. Rang again. He picked it up, weary.

"What."

“Just want to say welcome, buddy. Welcome.”

The line went dead.

Knock knock.

Allen all but ran to the door, swung it wide open, said, “What’s the matter, forget your keys?”

But it wasn’t Curt. It was something else. Something that smiled. Its teeth were loose — more than one had fallen away — and its cheekbones erupted from beneath its eyes, granite tombstones set in moldy earth, white volcanoes.

It said, “You wouldn’t talk to me, Allen, so I came on over. I might start to think you don’t love me anymore. But I love you, oh god, I want you so bad, you’re so big big big . . .”

It came in. Allen fell backwards to the floor. It straddled him, moaned with exaggerated passion, bounced on him, its pelvic bones cut into him. He opened his mouth and nothing came out. All the while he thought, At least it’s over now and I can give up. Thank you, God, if you’re there.

Curt paid for the groceries and started through the automatic door, but glanced at the newspapers stacked there and stopped, his eyes trapped by a story in the lower right hand corner on the front page.

“Oh God, that’s where he is.”

The article read, “Alexander Heller, President and CEO of Heller Enterprises, Inc., was interred today following memorial services in Chicago. Heller succumbed to lung cancer late Tuesday after a lingering illness.

“Heller founded Heller Enterprises in 1949, beginning with investments in airlines, and pioneered laser communications. In 1962 Heller Enterprises acquired Goodham & Marx, Ltd., becoming the largest venture capital firm in the United States.

“Alexander Heller is survived by his wife, the former Catherine Elizabeth Cornham; two daughters, Candice and Gretchen; and one son, Broderick.”

“My Jesus God,” Curt said, “that’s where he’s been. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t even know.”

He raced home to tell Allen.

\*

Curt stared down at his friend. Allen's face was set in a silent howl of terror that might easily have been mistaken for the mask of lust. Looks like he died humping, Curt thought, and realized he was grinning, looking at a corpse and grinning.

He set the sack of groceries on the kitchen table. He went into the bathroom — no willies now — removed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. He looped his Pierre Cardin belt around the shower head and stood on the edge of the tub. He looked at the walls, at his reflection shadowed separately in each tile, and put his head in the loop.

Already the voices had started. One, a woman's at one time but now changed to a sexless, gravelly monotone, rode above the others, descant to chaos.

"Oh Curt, you were the youngest, you were my favorite. So innocent, you hardly knew what to do. I was the first, wasn't I? Wasn't I, Curt?"

He nodded, smiling, and balanced on his toes.

". . . not just once, but forever. I'll teach you so much, Curt, Curt, and for me you will always be special."

"Come on, buddy" "You won't believe" "She is incredible" "always be the best because you were the youngest"

Curt smiled and stepped off into the air, jigging merrily, joining the others. Party time.

5.

And then Brod.

Broderick Heller sat easily in the padded leather swivel chair behind the huge polished oak desk that had been his father's. Now it was his.

His father's office was tastefully decorated: paneled, carpeted, ornamented with two large canvasses by Remington and a small pre-Columbian figurine in a lighted glass case. Broderick didn't like the Remingtons: they would have to go. But there would be plenty of time for that when he moved in.

The office, the stocks, the whole vast bulk of Heller Enterprises — subsidiaries, intermediaries, covers, shelters — all were his. Or would be, in a very few years, after college was out of the way. Until then it would be managed for him by a competent army of lawyers, chairmen, board members. But he would keep close watch on all that went on in his company.

He loosened his necktie and settled back into the pleasantly musty old-leather smell. The chair sighed to him.

Something entered his office. Something that drove before it a foul wind, a stench of moldering bodies, a stink cleansing itself slowly through time, as murky water is cleansed by passing through layers of gravel and crushed charcoal. This stink needed only to pass through one more layer to become clean.

The brown wind shook the heavy draperies along the wall of glass that looked out on the city. Broderick did not notice this.

Downstairs, outside, a car waited for him, and with it a uniformed chauffeur: Broderick was due home for a conference with his attorneys; “a briefing session,” they’d said. They wanted to clear up with the heir several hush-hush business matters. “And,” the attorneys had said, “we should discuss the perks of your position.”

“Oh?” Brod said.

“Yes. The perquisites,” the attorneys pontificated, “are those benefits of a position which are not . . . officially contracted. Do you understand?”

Brod laughed. He had understood the perquisites of his position since he was old enough to look in a mirror.

So the attorneys were going to explain the unofficial benefits of his new status as head of Heller Enterprises. But it was comfortable in the quiet, empty building, and attorneys could wait. He swiveled slowly back and forth in the chair, eyes half closed, lips slightly parted to reveal straight white teeth, sharp teeth. He wondered if he should start smoking cigars.

Something stepped out of shadow fully into the golden light that pooled about the desk. It was a mass of bones and dried meat, and it walked on two legs, but the bones of its feet were separated and lost. Its hair was longer than hair could grow in life, but patches of the scalp were



missing, and the hair seemed thin where it hung over the exposed scapulae and ribs.

Broderick wondered where he should go to school now. Some place in Chicago, close to home, close to the business, so he could keep his hand in. He could not afford to ignore Heller Enterprises now. He could not afford amusing but pointless friendships with the wrong people, people who could do nothing for him.

But there were so many other things he could afford.

The thing raised its hands like a marionette, opened the bony ridges of its mouth to speak. No sound was heard. It gnashed its toothless jaws, shook its head, its hair fluttered and fell off in soft wisps that vanished before they touched the thick carpet.

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

The chauffeur.

"You asked me to remind you, sir, at four."

"Thank you. I'll be down."

The chauffeur nodded and left. Broderick tapped his fingers together, twice, and looked again at the walls of his office. Something brighter than the Remingtons, he thought. More modern. He would have to think about it. Plenty of time.

He smiled at his office.

The thing, unseen, lost, gave rise to an echoing, unheard wail, and swirled back among the shadows into whatever it had made for itself.

## How to get here

It's very easy to find our house.

You'll most likely come into the city over Bile Bridge, that's how everybody comes. There is a back way, through Desolation, but the road is bad with several dangerous hairpin curves, and I know you hate to muss your hair.

Just over the bridge follow the signs to Main Street. This is the main street. It will lead you through the downtown business distraction where all our shops are, closed. Don't leave Main Street! If you do, you will find yourself among the theme restaurants, where even we locals tend to get lost and suicidal. Eventually you'll come to a traffic circle with eight stoplights. Three left, seven right, two left into Carpal Tunnel. If you come out of the tunnel — mind the reverse drawbridge in there — you'll see a huge black building right in front of you. Stop. This is Banal Tower. It's on the historic registry. It was built in 1812 to start a war, so it's very old, but has been completely modernized to remove all trace of style. You might like to take a tour of the Tower, if you have an hour to spare and the guides aren't armed. Well worth the risk.

Almost there! Turn left (unless you're driving the aquamarine 1963 Cougar; if so, turn right and reverse the following directions) and follow an unnamed road all the way to the Sump of Foul Condensation. You'll know you're getting close by the strong odor of failure. They're very good at that around here, it's our only industry. Something that can't be farmed out to the Chinese!

Hang right past the Sump, and right again at the next intersection. We're two blocks down, just past Conventional and Narrative, second house on the left, the little white bungalow with the resigned picket fence.

Can't wait to see you. Hope you make it!

## Noir

I don't know, I just don't know how it happened. It was just one damned wrong turn after another, and another. . . .

I always been a hard-luck kind of guy. Nothing ever came easy to me. I been fighting, I been scratching, never hurting anyone, never taking the wrong way like some guys I know. But I always believed in a mysterious fate that forces our lives into the stories it plots.

I'm a jazzman, piano. New York was dead, the clubs sewn up, I couldn't get work. I was looking for kicks, I was looking for jazz, I was looking for the beat. I decided to hitch out to the West Coast. By the time I got to Kansas I was past my last nickel, and I couldn't get a ride or a handout for two days.

Finally a big Studebaker pulled up and a wide guy in a cheap suit opened the door.

"Hey buddy, you sure are looking beat. When was the last time you had real food? When was the last time you got yourself clean? Thought so! Thought so! Name's Brody, Jack Brody. Saw you hitching, buddy, and I said to myself, This is a boy needs a helping hand, and who knows when the next one'll come along? Yessir, buddy, this is a hard world, and we all need to help each other out. Take me, for an instance. You probably look at me and say, Here's a guy with the world in his pocket. Nice new car, nice clean suit, fat in the middle, big sweet cigar. Fact is, buddy, I could use a hand myself. I'm just like anybody, I got my troubles. Not big troubles, buddy, not so big as yours. Fact is, my troubles might help you

out. I need help, see? And I'm willing to pay for it. You need money, and I need help. Buddy, what could be neater than that?

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you the whole picture, then you can easy make up your mind. Nothing sneaky about it, nothing underhand. I got to pick up something from a fella in Wichita, but I got to be in Tulsa the very same day. Now, here's what I'll do. I'll drop you off in Wichita to meet this here fella, get you a hotel, give you twenty dollars, plenty to get by on for a couple days. Then we meet up again Friday morning and I drive you as far west as Tucson. How does that hit you? Can I be fairer? Get you a bed, get you two dinners, all for a simple little friendly favor. Like they say, buddy, one hand washes . . . What do you say? We got a deal?"

Nothing about it set right with me. Picking up something for a guy who couldn't be there? In Wichita, Kansas? But it was a bed and a shower and a couple square meals, and I wasn't about to turn it down.

"Thatta boy, buddy! Thatta boy! I knew you were a right sort the minute I saw you. What'd you say your name was?"

We drove through the afternoon. The empty prairies passed by the window and I fell into a sort of trance. When we got to Wichita, Brody dropped me in front of a fleabag hotel and slipped me the twenty.

"Now remember, buddy. Tomorrow, twelve noon. The corner under the train bridge. A bald guy'll give you a box. See you Friday!"

After I showered and shaved and got my shoes shined, I stopped in at the bar next door for a beer. Oh, that tasted right. Then I noticed someone giving me the eye. She was a little the worse for wear, and her voice could scrape the paint off the walls. But her face was good, and her build was better, and best of all, she made the first move.

"You got a nice face, mister. Buy a girl a drink? I got nothing but time, and I kind of thought someone like you might like someone like me. My name's Candy, mister. Yeah, like the store. Mamma wasn't bright, but she knew the score. Men like it sweet, and sweet is what I'd have to be. Got a cigarette? Thanks. Boy, I bet you're flush. Light me, mister. I don't intend to act all weak and frail. You got a nice face, mister, and I'm overdue for a friendly time. What do you say? Care to join me in some fun, hon? I'll be outside. You let me know what you think. Oh, and thanks for the drink."

All right, I'd had more than beer while she was doing the talking, and my hormones got the better of me. That night my hotel bed wasn't as lonely as I thought it was going to be.

But a bed's not always worth the trouble of making it. I woke up with my head full of needles and my mouth full of cotton. The other side of the bed was empty, and so was my wallet. Brody's twenty bucks was gone with the dame. Money never could stand my company.

By the time I figured it all out, it was after twelve and I was late for the pick-up. I pulled on my clothes, slapped down my hair, and hurried out into the sun.

As I got to the corner under the train bridge, I saw a bald guy in a hound's-tooth jacket waiting with a paper-wrapped box stuck under his arm, just like Brody said. I started up to say hello.

All of a sudden a black Buick went by screaming on its tires. There was a shot, and the Buick peeled off. The bald guy teetered, but he didn't go down. He staggered up to me, shoved the box in my hands, then fell at my feet. I got down close and he whispered to me.

"You're sittin' on dynamite . . . lay low for Brody . . . watch out for the fat man . . . with the scar . . . on his nose. . . ."

He made a funny rattle in his throat and his eyes turned up to study the inside of his head.

Now, get me straight, I'm no sort of hero. I was sweating bullets, and when I heard a woman scream, when I heard a siren, I jumped up and I started running!

I ducked into an alley, hid behind some trash cans, and right away opened the box. It was empty!

I sat down and tried to figure it all out, but nothing made sense, nothing made sense, and my head still hurt, and I couldn't swallow. I pitched that empty box into the garbage and took off.

I didn't have fifty cents in my pocket, but I found a nickel and got some coffee. That helped just a little. I nursed that cuppa till almost dark, then I went downtown to catch a ride somewhere away from this flat town, away from this trouble, and as far as I could get from a guy named Brody.

It was a long walk through some lonely streets. But a car pulled up beside me on the road out of town, the door swung open, and I got inside. Then I saw who was driving.

"Your face don't look so nice now, mister. Don't get mad, hon, don't look that way. I'm sorry about your money. If I knew today was gonna turn out like it did, I would've let you be. Last night was nice, but a girl like me's got to look out for herself. Life's no breeze. When I left your room this morning, two big guys grabbed me and told me if I was smart I'd tell them all I knew about you. I didn't know much, you know that's true, but I guess they bought it. They let me go and told me I should maybe find myself another boyfriend. My mother didn't raise a dope. I figured it was time to blow this town. You're trouble, hon. I don't even know why I stopped to pick you up. I guess you're just the kind of guy a girl has a hard time getting out of her head. Even if she thinks he might get her dead."

For the first time that day I felt almost easy. Bad luck got farther and farther behind us. There's nothing like a car to make you feel safe and ready-to-wear, and I fell asleep with my face in her bleached-blond hair. . .

I woke up all of a sudden to find the car stopped and Candy gone. I was somewhere off the highway with nothing in sight but a dirty railroad shack falling to dust on the prairie, and a big black Buick parked outside it like a mistake.

Two huge goons came up out of nowhere, grabbed me, socked me, and dragged me inside. Candy was there, hiding in a corner, smoking one of my cigarettes. And in a chair sat three hundred pounds of fat man, a fat man with an ugly hooked scar on his pug nose.

"Well, friend, you've given us more than a bit of trouble. Forgive my rude way of getting in touch with you, and I'll forgive your stubble. Play it smart, and you might get out of this in one living piece. Thanks to my boys here, who acted like a pair of jackasses, we lost track of a certain box that I'd very much like to get back. You know where it is. Why don't you save us some sweat, and you some more blood? Talk to me. Trust me, you don't want to make me mad. Whatever Brody paid you, I'll pay more than double. In fact, I'll give you the chance to continue to breathe."

Candy said, "He means business, baby. Don't be a jerk."

“Come, friend, come. Do we have a deal?”

I would’ve talked plenty if I’d had anything to say.

The fat man sighed. “You sadden me, friend. Boys—”

The two apemen came close.

Suddenly the door slammed open and that bastard Brody busted in, two guns blazing away. The others pulled out their own revolvers and started shooting.

I ducked behind a couple feet of prime gangster goon and hid till the bullets stopped flying around the room. When I opened my eyes again, everybody was laying there, bloody and dead.

I crawled over to where Candy was crumpled on the floor. She moaned, and I lifted up her head.

“You . . . stupid lug . . . wouldn’t know good luck . . . if it slapped you silly. That box . . . inside the cardboard . . . worth a million bucks. . . .”

She sighed. The last noise she’d ever make.

It was just one damned wrong turn after another, and another. Candy was right, I wouldn’t know good luck if it slapped me silly. A million bucks handed to me in a cardboard box, and I throw it away! And there I was with five dead people in a railroad shack, three nice cars outside, and all of them shot up to hell so they couldn’t move.

I always believed in a mysterious fate that forces our lives into the stories it plots. But it’s not fate, it’s not any mysterious force. It’s just people wanting, and dealing, and saying yes to any piece of change that passes by.

And now here I am, in the middle of nowhere, back where I was when I started, trying to hitch, trying to get somewhere, anywhere, before somebody finds that mess I left behind me.





## Alan Steel An Essay

Alan Steel is irritable. He is weary of being trapped in a loincloth in poorly dubbed Italian movies, no matter how large the breasts of the seductive villainess. His own quite large breasts are always inflated to their maximum girth, for he exists in a conundrum of just-completed bench presses in order to be ready for his next close-up.

Alan Steel is irritable because Steve Reeves will always be the real Hercules although Alan is the better and more-often-employed actor. Alan Steel is irritable because his movies, unlike those of Steve Reeves, are not based on mangled Greco-Roman mythology but on the warped imaginations of teams of unknown hacks with misspelled American pseudonyms. Alan Steel is also irritable because his name is not Alan Steel.

Alan Steel worries that his large breasts may begin to sag. As he is always naked from the waist up, he cannot avail himself of the wire supports favored by the massively mammariated villainess. When he inevitably crushes the villainess in a passionate amnesiac embrace, her large wired breasts poke painfully into his own. This irritates Alan Steel.

Alan Steel spends his time between bench presses combing his beard. Sometimes Alan Steel is uncertain whether he is Alan Steel or Hercules or Sergio or Maciste or Samson. Alan Steel is never uncertain about his beard.

Alan Steel's color is beginning to fade. He is often sandy yellow rather than ruggedly bronze. The sky has taken on a disconcertingly jaundiced cast. No one takes archival care of Alan Steel, though he made several

people rich by being Alan Steel. No one restores him. He longs for a day when his words match the movement of his lips.

His loincloth chafes between his labyrinthine thighs. Poor Alan Steel.

## Moonlight and Lloyd Bridges

Lloyd Bridges holds the female pseudo-star with the marvelous surety of a homely man who believes himself handsome. In a moment they will meet death by stock footage as their rocketship crashes to earth, and still Lloyd has had no opportunity to bare his chest — his best legally filmable asset.

Lloyd normally enjoys living a life underscored with music, but the slashing chords that lend drama to the moment annoy him. They do not conduce to philosophic resignation. They betray the moonlight that unscientifically fills the cabin of the rocketship and all of space, the soft moonlight that gives the female pseudo-star's eyes a gleam, an effect heightened by the glycerin that coats them. If he knew anything about classical music, Lloyd might wish instead a Chopin nocturne were playing, or twenty bars of a Mahler adagio. As it is, he rather wishes the silence of space, which he has heard so much about, accompanied this careening moment. Silence, or a simple ballad played by a string orchestra, a tune that would be profitably reprised over the end titles to ensure everyone goes away with the memory of his noble posture.

For Lloyd, the female he holds in his manly arms is only a prop, necessary scene dressing to allow him to play out the trope of stoic masculine heroism. He keeps his jawline firm, his upper lip stiff, his eyes turned upward to the illogical moonlight. A curl of his hair falls neatly over his brow to signify anxiety.

And out there, in the darkness beyond the celluloid, someone will furtively wipe away a tear before his girlfriend notices.

Here comes the earth.

Lloyd consoles himself with the knowledge that he will soon sire a child in color, a son who shall carry on the family tradition of one raised eyebrow and wry half-smiles; a son who may one day even be nominated for the highest acknowledgment of a two-dimensional world.

Let the stock footage come, Lloyd thinks. He squints bravely into the moonlight. My hair is in place. My cheeks are smooth and powdered. Let it come, and damn the music. Let it come.

## Hum

There is a seven-foot-long cockroach under my kitchen sink. Such a thing forces changes in a man's life.

I estimate that the cockroach weighs at least one hundred pounds. I am five foot ten and weigh one-eighty, so perhaps it weighs more. But a lot of cockroach is antennae and legs, which don't weigh much even on a seven-foot cockroach.

There is little I can do about my roach. It won't fit in a roach motel; it wallows in Raid as in a soothing shower; and it ate all the boric acid. I called an exterminator, a bored-looking fat man with a chewed-up cigar. He took one look under the sink, turned white as the kitchen cabinets, let out a single high, pure squeal, and ran away. I had to call his company and have them send a boy to pick up his tank of bug poison. I don't like to pass judgment on people, but really, there's no excuse for that kind of behavior from a professional.

My wife, Dorothy, suggested that I swat the roach. I pointed out that the roach was seven feet long, while a rolled newspaper is no more than twelve inches. "Then use your shoe," she said.

"My shoe is even smaller," I replied. I wear size 7½. This is small for a man of my size. My hands are also quite dainty. Dorothy always said I had little-girl hands. My father, an ex-All American, despaired of my ever playing basketball because my hands were too small to grip the ball. I didn't mind. I hate basketball.

"It's what we get for living in New York," Dorothy said when we discovered the cockroach. "Everywhere you turn, vermin! Rats in the

garbage, punks on the streets, and roaches under the sink! I suppose we should be grateful there aren't any mosquitoes."

"Yes, there is that," I said.

"Now we *have* to think about moving to the country."

"Let's not go into that again, Dorothy." Moving to the country was one of Dorothy's pet manias.

"I will not live in a city with giant cockroaches!"

"There are drawbacks to every neighborhood, Dorothy."

"You don't care what happens to Caryn!" Caryn: our daughter. "She can't grow up in the same house with a monster, Francis!"

I knew Dorothy was angry because she called me Francis. I prefer Frank. She only called me Francis when she was deeply disturbed, to annoy me. On the whole, this cockroach affair was harder on Dorothy than on me.

I don't know where the roach came from. I assume, if it had grown in our cabinets, we would have noticed it when it was only a foot long, or two feet long, or at least when it was only five feet long, and something might still have been done. But when we first found it, nestled comfortably among the Ajax and Brillo Pads, it was already seven feet long and beyond our power to swat. I tried to cheer Dorothy up by remarking that if I had swatted the seven-foot-long cockroach in the beginning, as she wanted me to, God only knew what kind of mess she would have had to clean up. The normal cockroaches, the little ones we're used to seeing skitter up the kitchen walls when we turn on the light in the middle of the night, make quite a mess when swatted.

We began to hear complaints from the neighbors. Our building superintendent called on us one evening. He is Hispanic with a very limited English vocabulary. He spluttered out long strings of syllables, of which I could only understand "hell," "crazy," and "damn." When at last I comprehended what he was talking about, I opened the cupboard door and showed him the problem. He turned white as the kitchen cabinets, emitted a single high, pure squeal, and ran away. I returned his ring of keys the next morning.

Actually, we had little trouble with the neighbors until their dogs and cats began to disappear.

A seven-foot-long cockroach is a surprising insect. The first noticeable oddity is, of course, its size. The mere existence of a seven-foot-long cockroach is quite astonishing enough for most people. Its antennae wave like palm fronds and often clog the sink. Its legs are like wrought-iron rods; all the woodwork is scratched and it has chewed through the cabinet walls. I will probably lose my security deposit.

But beyond this are some very singular anatomical peculiarities. (I have no little interest in these peculiarities, perhaps because of a high school Science Fair project I attempted in which I fed one group of cockroaches nothing but soda pop, another group nothing but bread, and a third group raw hamburger. The experiment was to determine how different diets affected their metabolisms. But I had to give up the project when the soda-pop roaches died and the hamburger roaches broke out of their box and ate the bread roaches). First, the roach is white and secretes a slimy oil over its exoskeleton, which is unattractive. Second, it's eyes, when I can catch a glimpse of them in the shadows, are blue. And it smells. I know that roaches are considered unclean, but I had no idea they had body odor; somehow one doesn't stop to think of that. When the oven is on its odor is overwhelming.

But what I find really fascinating is that my cockroach hums. Doubtless all roaches hum, but at normal size their hum would be inaudible to the human ear. My roach produces a great basso rumble that is not unpleasant. On a summer evening it can be quite soothing.

Despite all this I was, at first, as anxious to be rid of the beast as anybody. Dorothy's constant sniping remarks, therefore, were not appreciated.

"What a loser you must be!" she said one night in her most strident voice while washing the dishes. The roach pulsed a steady bass to her treble descant. "Can't even kill a cockroach!"

"It's seven feet long," I reminded her.

"A bug!" she continued, enjoying the release of a good rant. "I have to buy steel boxes to hold our bread and comestibles, and clamps to lock them shut. And why? Because my husband, who wears a size 7½ shoe, can't kill a lousy cockroach!"

"Perhaps if I bought a gun—"



"Perhaps perhaps perhaps! Perhaps if you had a gun! Perhaps if you had some dynamite! Perhaps if we lived in the country on a million-dollar estate you could tell the butler to kill it!"

Dorothy knew as well as I the financial impracticality of our living in the country, but she always liked to put in her two cents.

"Francis, we are living on canned food."

We were. The roach ate everything not enclosed in metal. Dorothy, we had discovered, was allergic to stewed tomatoes.

"I can't even leave the dishes to soak overnight," she sobbed. "Francis, you are a failure."

"Now, now, it's just a bug."

"Just a bug!" she laughed, a bit maniacally. "Just a bug! Francis, the thing is *seven feet long*! It weighs over a hundred pounds, you told me so yourself." She slapped away the flailing antenna that poked out from under the sink and fluttered up her leg. We heard a squeal, and the furry thing retreated. "They make *movies* about things like this! Francis," she went on, fully aware that I do not like to be called Francis, "Francis, this is the last straw. Muggings, rapes, rising subway fares, high taxes, pollution — these I can handle. But this cockroach is the last straw on my overloaded back! I can take no more!"

I knew what this was leading up to.

"We have to do something! We have to get out of this city!"

I sighed. "We just signed a ten-year lease, Dorothy."

"I don't care! I will not allow my baby to live another week in this apartment."

"I can't afford to commute."

"We can't afford to stay!" Dorothy had developed a distressing habit of speaking in exclamation points. "How do we know how long it will be before that damn thing decides to come out from under the sink? How long will it be satisfied with the neighbors' pets? *How big is it going to get?*"

"Dorothy, you're getting hysterical again."

"*Hysterical?! Hysterical!?*"

She raved on. The kitchen cabinets rocked as the roach inside shivered. I, too, shivered.

I found the cockroach's hum very soothing, but Dorothy could not sleep because of it. She regularly woke me from my sweet dreams of distant worlds and peaceful, dark tunnels, sobbing in exhausted frustration. I felt for her, truly I did. But I needed my sleep. My work was showing signs of the strain. Mr. Belger, my boss, called me in one morning to discuss my failing performance. I explained the problems at home.

"A *bug*, Johnston?" he said. "A *bug*? Come on, man, gut up! This is the real world, not a third-rate fifties' monster movie. Take control of your life! I don't have to tell you, it's dog-eat-dog out there. No room for the willies over a lousy bug. Do I make myself clear?"

Indeed he did. I thanked him for his advice and went home that night filled with a new determination. But I was met by an even more determined delegation of my neighbors.

"Just a minute, Mr. Johnston," said Mr. Nately from 2B. He led a party of five tenants. They blocked the hallway. Each wore a surly, stolid expression. "We've got to talk to you a minute."

"Have you gotten rid of that disgusting thing yet?" Mrs. Krumholtz, 4C, asked.

"No, it's still there. And I don't mind telling you, it's given my wife and me a few bad nights."

"Disgraceful!" said Mrs. Carollo, 3A. "I don't know how you stand it."

I appreciated the sympathy.

"We think you should know," Mr. Nately continued, "we're getting up a petition to have you thrown out of the building."

I started with horror. "A tenant's coalition?" I gasped. "But why? Evict the roach, not me!"

"You not doink anyding about it," Mr. Pyszovic, ground floor front, ejaculated.

"It's the building's responsibility—"

"They provide an exterminator," said Mr. Nately. "That's the extent of their responsibility. From there on it's up to the tenant."

"It's clear, Johnston — it's that roach or you."

I entered my apartment in a gloomy state of mind. I was greeted by the deep-earth thrum of my cockroach. Instantly the pressures of the world seemed to lessen. I stood a tad taller, and could face the sight of Dorothy

in curlers and dirty nightgown with little more than a slight pang. Dorothy hadn't been the same since Caryn disappeared. I had come home one night to find her sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, holding one of Caryn's little shoes. "Dorothy?" I whispered, but she only hummed — a perfect fifth above the roach — and tapped the shiny little shoe against her nose. Finally she said, "I found it in the kitchen." And, much later, with a wistful sigh, "She would have loved the country."

Well. Life goes on, and so must we. But Dorothy wouldn't. I often found her sitting on Caryn's little bed, holding a stuffed poodle or giraffe to one cheek, staring absently through the frilly priscilla curtains at the air shaft.

I tried to sympathize. I tried to console. I cooked her favorite breakfast, french toast and sausage, three days running; but I had to give it to the roach. Nothing helped. She woke two or three times every night screaming, stopped brushing her teeth, neglected to flush the toilet after use. It became unbearable.

Last Sunday I woke for the first time in weeks with a smile on my lips, happy from my dreams of a far-flung cosmos crawling on many legs. I looked forward to a tranquil morning with the paper before going in to the office for a little overtime. My ideal for a Sunday morning is *The New York Times* crossword, a large mug of black coffee, and the mythic hum of my giant cockroach. And so I settled down, paper on the table beside my La-Z-Boy recliner, coffee steaming invitingly; and then Dorothy entered.

"*Francis! Francis!*"

Like some television sit-com fury, hair streaming with loose curlers, Dorothy wheeled about the living room shrieking. Her voice quit the realms of humanity and became something cosmic. The roach began to fret; its hum pulsed faster and faster, ranging up and down the oriental scale. Still Dorothy shrieked, beating her breast with Caryn's single shoe.

"*Francis! Francis!*"

I ask now for compassion and understanding. I had had a long, difficult week at work. My security was beset on all sides by threatening neighbors, threatening boss, threatening world. The peace of my mind, the solidity of my sanity depended upon those four brief, quiet hours of sunny Sunday morning with my coffee and crossword puzzle. I could not

continue to do battle with society without at least that tiny respite, that period of spiritual regrouping.

*"Francis! Francis!"*

And there was Dorothy, clawing at the walls, eyes white all the way around, gray hair whipping like snakes, shedding bobby pins with every moan.

*"Francis! Francis!"*

The roach throbbed, the walls shuddered, plaster dust sifted down. Somewhere a dog began to howl. And the roach's hum spiraled up and up and up. Hum.

*"Francis! Francis!"*

What could I do? My Sunday morning lay in gasping, bleeding tatters.

*"Francis! Francis!"*

I hate being called Francis.

Life is simpler now. Mr. Belger is pleased at the improvement in my work and has given me a raise. I have placated the neighbors; Mrs. Krumholtz, 4C, even admitted to me, *sotto voce*, that she rather enjoys the humming of my roach. "It's kinda like Magic Fingers when you sleep," she said. "Done wonders for my back." I've taken down the lace curtains and replaced them with red venetian blinds. Caryn's room is now a comfortable study with an imitation fireplace and a vibrant hunting scene hanging above the desk.

And always, always, my home thrills to the music of my cockroach. Since Dorothy's no longer around, I've given him the kitchen. I can see his eyes now, glowing blue, from where I sit. His gaze is almost tangibly benign. His formerly pallid exoskeleton glows a healthy pink. He is getting bigger. Well, he's had a varied diet.

I've named him Herbert.



## Some Places of Interest to the Anomalist

### THE GLADE

Somewhere in the upper Amazon Basin there lies a glade, surrounded on all sides by near-impenetrable rain forest, yet singularly free of vegetation within its circuit. Free, that is, except for a single example of the exceedingly rare, though not unknown, *Bergolana lautreamontii*, growing in the exact center of the glade. *B. lautreamontii* reaches a height of three meters and puts forth a single bloom, of a disturbing purple, in the form a human *membrum virile*.

This glade was first discovered by Europeans in 1872, and again in 1874, and several times thereafter at regular intervals, but never in the same location. For this glade seems to translate itself after each discovery to some new, more remote location. Yet each time it is discovered, or rediscovered, it matches exactly the description given by its last human interloper. Recent rediscoveries have led to an exhaustive photographic record, precise measurements, and more accurate mapping than was previously possible. These data prove beyond a doubt that it is indeed the identical glade, though miles distant from its former location. Science remains at a loss to explain this phenomenon. Native traditions do not address the matter.

## BROUWENSTIJN CANAL

In a quiet corner of storied Bruges, the Brouwenstijn Canal goes quietly about its business, accepting the personal effluvia of the narrow houses that border it, now and again witnessing the passage of a barge, lulling the unobservant passerby into a state of unearned complacency. Yet the waters of the canal possess the peculiar property of allowing no reflection to escape their inky surface. Neither barge, nor house, nor passerby may mark their image reversed in its depths. Even on the clearest of days, the brightest of nights, the waters remain a disconcerting black. Indeed, during the great fire of 1911, when the entire district burned to the ground and flames were seen to leap more than a hundred feet into the sky, those who escaped the holocaust noted that the waters of the Brouwenstijn Canal remained blank as slate. "But," said an unnamed bystander, quoted in the local gazette, "one should not be standing around looking in the water when a fire is going on."

## SIBBERTS SWAMP

Sibberts Swamp covers a scant four square miles in northern Alabama where the Chalamachokee Creek leaves its banks to spread across the lowlands in a soggy tangle of hillocks and sinkholes, reeds and mangrove. But something odd occurred here on a day in May of 1961. Local hunter Bobby Robert Scamander saw a remarkable figure silhouetted against the overcast sky near a stand of black oak, a sight that raised the hair on the back of his neck and made his knees weak. When questioned, Mr. Scamander could not answer definitely whether the shape were beastlike or hominid, mammalian or reptilian, furred, scaled, or feathered, or even whether it stood on two, four, or more legs. All he could attest to were its "red eyes like two barbecues" and its distinctive odor, which he described as "sweet as a pawpaw, but painful." Mr. Scamander became the butt of local humor and an object of interrogation by those seeking to substantiate their own wild theories, whether supernatural, extraterrestrial, or psychological, and determined never to speak of this

incident again, a promise he kept, as far as is known, to the day of his death. But he was heard to remark, on more than one occasion, "You won't catch me opening my mouth to say boo in this town again."

## THE HATCHKISS HOTEL

An archetypal evocation of small-town America, with its wide wraparound porch, leaded windows, and mansard roof, the Hatchkiss Hotel in Bonner Springs, Ark., erected in 1869, offers a strange hospitality to its guests: instead of the peace and comfort implied by its Victorian decor, handmade quilts, and fried chicken dinners, many visitors experience constant nausea, disorientation, violent headaches, and episodes of atypical irritability. Tests with modern scientific instruments reveal no noxious fumes, subterranean waters, poisonous molds, electromagnetic disturbances, or other contaminations. In fact, the hotel is astoundingly well built. Its floors are exactly level, its walls are precisely plumb, and all corners form perfect 90-degree angles. At least one investigator has speculated that it is this very perfection that causes a subliminal distress in certain sensitive visitors. But whatever the cause, the Hatchkiss Hotel remains a favorite of travelers, especially area newlyweds. Reservations strongly recommended. Try the blueberry cobbler.

## DZHAMKUK

The tiny village of Dzhamkuk in northeastern Turkestan has the dubious honor of being home to not one, but two separate and presumably unrelated marvels.

First, the village has at least twice in the last seventy years vanished from its site near the Syr Amul tributary and remained undiscoverable by the authorities, only to reappear months later without any apparent consternation, ill effect, or notice on the part of its population.

Second, every person born in the village — barring accident or act of God — lives to at least the age of 101, though not always in robust good health. This holds true even of those who later abandon the village for



urban life. Is this an effect of the fermented mare's milk all inhabitants of Dzhamkuk imbibe from birth? Or is it the largely vegetarian diet these people enjoy? Or are the two mysteries linked after all?

## LAKE WALLOON

The waters of Lake Walloon, in the far reaches of northern Saskatchewan, periodically change color, from gray to scarlet to puce to indigo and on through the spectrum. The change of color normally lasts one or two days, but on one notable occasion, in 1983, the lake remained a vivid, acidic yellow for six full weeks.

There are four tiny hamlets strung along the shores of the lake, and no industrial facilities; the waters have been tested for pollutants, but the results have been negative. Scientists have suggested that the leaching of various metals, mineral salts, and oxides from the surrounding tundra explain the phenomenon, but none has offered any explanation as to why only one metal, salt, or oxide would leach at any given time, and never twice in succession.

"I think it's pretty," says long-time resident Johelen Dickson. "Though it can give you a turn, seeing purple run out of your tap. Always tastes fine. Anyway, we change our clothes to look nice; why shouldn't the lake?" Her companion, Mary Goodell, adds, "Makes as much sense as anything else in this world."

## THE TEMPLE OF AN UNKNOWN DEITY OR DEITIES

Who can say what bizarre rites were performed here, what terrifying gods might have been worshipped in this hidden place? Or not?

The temple of an unknown deity or deities was discovered in 1947 by a Cambodian peasant boy in search of scrap metal from the late war. Sliding through a smooth tunnel, he found himself inside a perfectly spherical stone hollow beneath the forest floor, fourteen feet in diameter, with the tunnel as its only means of entrance or egress, and a narrow shaft opening from its apex allowing only a faint light for illumination. There is no writing visible anywhere within it. Archaeologists have not been able to

link the temple to any known civilization, ancient or modern, oriental or occidental. They are not even agreed as to whether the temple was originally hollowed out by human hands or geological processes. Or whether it is in fact a temple.

Around the tunnel walls, at irregular intervals, are seventeen niches. Each niche contains a single carved stone figure, each different from the other, intricately ornamented with whorls and rippling lines, representing no recognizable earthly being or heavenly approximation. Were these figures the venerated manifestations of ancestral spirits? Tutelary deities? Were they the lares and penates of some lost race? Or were they, as anthropologist David Carnrike has suggested, the obsessive work of some lone neurotic, inspired to this monumental labor by unnamed psychic forces? As Prof. Carnrike wrote in his dissertation *On the Unknown Temple* (University of Poughkeepsie, 1976), "Even in prehistoric times, might there not have been eccentrics? Neolithic cranks? Our presumption that all human artifacts have been created with sane purpose may be baseless."



## The Sphinxes

A traveler wandered through a vast desert. He had lost his way, but while he had water, and food, and his philosophic attitude, he did not despair. He walked by night; during the heat of the day he drew his cloak over his head and tried to sleep.

Finally he ate the last of his food and drank the last of his water. He looked up at the great arch of stars. His philosophic attitude threatened to disappear. But still he walked. He walked, and walked, until by chance he stumbled upon a small oasis almost hidden among the dunes. He ran to the tiny spring, fell to the sand, and drank deeply. His strength immediately revived, his philosophy was reborn. He drank again.

When he looked up, he fell back with a cry. Two huge shadows obscured the starry heaven. A second glance revealed that the shadows were two sphinxes sculpted of black stone, half buried in the sand; only the human heads, lion shoulders, and eagle wings were exposed to the brilliant starlight. The traveler smiled at his momentary fear. He stood up and drew near the statues. The sphinxes had the faces of haughty but beautiful women, and every feather on the wings was perfectly carved. The traveler touched one stony shoulder, brushed away a bit of sand, and found words engraved there, spelled in unknown symbols.

He bowed. "Pardon the intrusion, ladies, but a dying man may be forgiven some impoliteness. Your water has revived me, and I give you grateful thanks."

Something caught his eye between the two statues, something like a crypt built of stone. There was an archway in its center, and in the arch a door. He stepped toward it.

Suddenly a great noise broke the desert silence, a noise as of stone grinding on stone. The traveler started and saw that the eyes of the two sphinxes had opened.

"Oh!" he breathed.

The eyes of the sphinxes turned to him, four white eyes in the black faces, eyes that regarded him without humanity, without compassion. The two stone mouths opened with a sound like the crumbling of walls. With voices that seemed to rise from out of the deeps of the earth, the two sphinxes cried, "Mortal being, stand away!"

The traveler mutely contemplated these two wonders. Then he dared speak.

"Great goddesses! For I suppose you are goddesses."

"Not goddesses," responded one, "but spirits of the second rank."

"Spirits," said the other, "placed here to protect this sacred place."

"Ah," said the traveler, "this place is then sacred! Again, pardon me, ladies. But I give you thanks for your refreshing water."

"Oh! The mortal has drunk of the holy font!" brayed one.

"A mortal has profaned the divine waters!" bellowed the other.

The traveler said, "Whether sacred or no, water is water, and one dying of thirst must drink."

"Audacious mortal!" the two monsters cried. "Know ye that this is the Valley of the Ultimate Truth. In ancient days the priests discovered the Ultimate Truth, That which is eternal, That which is unchanging, That which is, was, and will ever be the sole and only Truth. In this sacred valley they struck the rocky earth with their staves, and lo, from out the stone flowed cool water. They struck the earth a second time, and lo, from out the earth emerged this Gateway. There they interred the wisdom they had won, and then they invoked us, daughters of the Sphinx, to guard these mysteries."

The traveler said, "Is the Truth so frail that it requires guarding?"

"Blasphemer! The Ultimate Truth is not for mortal men. Mortals cannot comprehend its glory. Who dares blaspheme against the Truth, him we shall destroy with tooth and claw!"

"But how?" asked the traveler. "You are made of stone."

The two sphinxes said, "Yes, during these many centuries we have gradually petrified. But still we protect, still we guard the Ultimate Truth."

The traveler thought a moment, then knelt in the sand and bowed his head. "Immortal spirits, dread angels, ancient wonders: During the whole of a long life I have always tried to separate reality from illusion, the true from the false. Through many trials, through almost unending torments, I have sought the true face of reality behind the lying mask of appearance. Now my lifelong quest is at an end. At the very point of death, I have at last found this treasure. Therefore I humbly pray, in the hope of fulfillment: Enlighten me! Reveal the One Certainty, the Fundamental Reality. Grant me that which you guard: the Ultimate Truth!"

The sphinxes shrieked in horror. "Arrogant mortal! Fall down in trembling before us!

The traveler did not fall, nor did he tremble. "But I humbly beg—"

"Silence! The Ultimate Truth is not for mortal beings!"

The traveler frowned. "But why such rage? What truth is true if no one knows it?"

The sphinxes roared. "Silence, blasphemer! Who are you to question the Eternal Truth?"

"Only a man," the traveler replied, "a man with a mind, and the human mind must always question. But if a truth remains unseen, unknown, then no one may test it. And if a truth remains untested, how can we know it is true? Can a truth really be true if it dare not face doubt?"

"Your words condemn you, damned mortal!"

"Your truth is unknown, at least since it was buried here by those who supposedly discovered it. What worth has an unknown truth? If no one has ever known your truth, then evidently we do not need it. And if we don't need your wonderful truth, then that truth means . . . nothing."

"Oh!" cried the sphinxes, "if we could only move! We would rend you with our claws!"

"But you can't move, poor spirits." The traveler stood. "You are stone, and cannot move. Like your truth, you have no strength. But despite this, I thank you most sincerely, ancient spirits, for at least your water is good.

I've never thought so clearly. And I now clearly see my own truth: If one guards truth against doubt, against trial, if one treats it like an invalid, even the greatest truth will become feeble emptiness. Only that truth which can freely wander the world and face all doubt will show itself as true. And those who know only that they know, and not why they know, must become immovable stone."

The two sphinxes roared to shake the stars. But the traveler quietly filled his water-skin at the spring and wandered again into the vast desert.

## Technology

Can I love it? Can I be so shallow? Is mechanized lust enough?  
Programmed satisfaction? Can I afford the electric bills? Maintenance  
fees?

Tenderly recharging its batteries. Lubricating its pressure rings.  
Blowing the dust carefully from its access ports. The murmur of its relays.  
The whisper of its hard drive. Can I love it?

Can I love him?





## The God Machine

### I.

"It's a simple and elegant idea," Alexander said, "and no doubt psychologically sound. But the execution is bound to be quite complex."

"You can figure it out." Sandra handed him a fresh beer. "You're a genius."

Alexander smiled wryly. "Your confidence is misplaced, but pleasing. No, the logistics really are beyond any one person."

"I'm here too."

"Beyond any two people. Theoretically it's easy, but practically! Do you have any idea how much of a charge would be needed to create an actual lightning bolt? Do you know how much charge a real lightning bolt carries?"

"A lot?"

"About a billion volts."

"Would we need that much?"

"Hmm. No, probably not. But to make a really big flash we're going to need a lot more than we could make portable. And it'll have to be portable."

"Yup."

"Not to mention being able to aim the damn thing. No, we'll need a full-blown team to pull this off, and of course once it goes beyond the two of us, we're screwed. No chance of keeping it quiet."

"Let me worry about that." She sighed. "But something's got to be done! These evil SOBs commit every crime and swindle dreamed up by mortal man—"

"Except this one," he interrupted, grinning.

"Ha ha. You think they'd hesitate to use something like this if they got the opportunity? They'd be drooling!"

Alexander nodded, shrugged, and drained half the beer.

She was into rant mode now. "They get up on TV every chance they get, spouting the inevitable God talk, as if anything could justify their heinous activities, and the public, trained that you can't say anything bad about the true believers, everybody's got a right to believe whatever, blah blah blah, accepts it all! Health care? Not in God's plan! Nuke Iran? Hey, God told me to! But imagine this: they get up there dragging in the same old Bible thumping BS, and bam! Blasted into fragments by a bolt of lightning! *That'd* put the real fear of God into people! It's too good an idea to let slide by, the whole sick fundie movement would be wiped out instantly. I would pay to see that."

"You'll have to pay big. We're talking immense expenditure on research alone. First we have to rig up an almost limitless electrical supply—"

"Could make you very, very rich if you figure it out," Sandra cajoled.

"—then some mechanism to direct the charge to the target, and only to the target . . . it's not easy, directing electrical current without wires, especially if you want an explosive discharge, which by its very nature is uncontrolled."

"Must be explosive." She drained her own beer.

"Then some way to make it portable, develop some means, which will have to be insulated, to transport it to the target location."

"Target," Sandra said dreamily.

"And you'd have to be able to use the weapon without getting caught."

"Goes without saying."

"And repeatedly. If you only use it once, they'll call it a freak. A scientific anomaly. They don't mind calling on science when they need it for backup, though heaven help science when they're on the creationist rampage."

"Repeatedly. Definitely. Use the thing over and over again, till they're shivering in their imported shoes, afraid to open their mouths. Every last one of them," she added vehemently.

Alexander Singh looked at Sandra warily. "No offense, San, but you're sounding just a wee bit fanatical."

She slammed down her bottle. "You can't fight fanatics with reason!"

2.

The four of them — Sandra, Micah, Jon, Carver — crowded around Alexander's basement workbench.

"We identify this thimble as the target," Alexander explained, "and I place it at this end of the table. Extrapolating to human scale, that would be more than fifty yards away."

"We might need more distance," Jon commented. "There are situations when we'll never be allowed that close."

"It's just a demo," Sandra said. "Watch."

"Right now of course I'm just aiming visually," Alexander continued. "I'm toying with the idea of radio directional devices, but there's also a slight possibility of satellites, GPS. With the amount of energy we'll be generating it might work."

Micah said, "Could you really use GPS?"

Alexander didn't look up from his invention, which resembled nothing so much as a handmade model railroad transformer from the 1930s. "Oh yeah. The trick would be to bounce the signal around enough to hide the source. But of course it would only take milliseconds, and as the signal wouldn't carry any real data and no one would be looking for it, we probably wouldn't have to hide it very well. Okay. Now, the thimble is giving a speech and says something particularly inane, like, I don't know, 'Jeezus hates homosexuals,' and . . ."

A sudden flash of light, and the thimble was spinning on the basement floor, one side blackened and caved in.

There was an appropriately reverential silence. Then Jon, Micah, Sandra, and Carver all cried out, in unison, "Cool!"

Alexander smiled with humble satisfaction.

"I told you you were a goddamn genius!" Sandra crowed.

Carver picked up the damaged thimble. "If only it were Rick Santorum. How'd you get it to hit only the thimble, and not shock us all?"

Now Alexander frowned. "That's a problem I'm working on. At this scale, with the low level of energy and the thimble an unobstructed target, it's easy to send the charge in one direction and hit it. But if there were objects blocking the target . . ."

"Like TV cameras," said Micah.

"Like people," said Sandra.

"Exactly. Especially people. There are ways to aim the discharge at one particular substance and have it bypass objects made of other stuff. But if we're aiming at people and they're in a crowd, hitting the target will pose difficulty."

"To put it mildly." Sandra shook her head. "We can't afford to blast innocent bystanders. It would take away the whole point of the exercise."

"Exercise." Jon made a face at her. "Is that what you're calling it?"

"Figure of speech."

"Don't do that," he warned. "That's what they do. Call mass murder 'collateral damage' and you don't face it as fact. We've got to stay clear on exactly what we're doing, or we're no better than them."

Sandra glared at the floor.

"It didn't make any noise. It needs to make a lot of noise," Micah said.

"This is just a prototype," Alexander said. "We build a prototype to work out the kinks, develop refinements."

"This one's going to need some refining if we're not going to do more damage than good," Carver said.

"I mean it, it needs to make noise," Micah repeated.

They looked at him.

"Well, it didn't make any noise. Real lightning makes thunder. If you want them to think it's God striking down crazy blasphemers, we're going to need thunder. Wrath of God, in Dolby stereo."

They all looked back at Alexander.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Sandra changed the subject. "What power source did you use here?" She poked at the little contraption of coiled copper.

"Just a nine-volt. I figured out a way to step up the voltage exponentially without increasing the size of the battery. But the discharge drained it dry."

"I sense a Nobel and a lucrative career in renewable energy for somebody," Jon said.

"So if this little nine-volt dry cell did that kind of damage to a thimble," Sandra said, "what are we looking at for a human-sized thunderbolt?" She nodded at Micah, who nodded back.

"Something a hundred times as powerful, more or less."

Sandra cocked her head to one side thoughtfully. "Car batteries?"

Jon snorted. "You'd need a couple dozen."

"So? They're cheap, easy to come by. Hook them up sequentially like in a home solar-energy system. Instead of sucking up the juice from the solar cells, they spit it out for the good of humankind."

"And you wouldn't have to replace 'em," Micah said. "Just hook 'em back up to the solar panels and recharge."

"How long does that take?" Carver asked.

Micah shrugged. "I don't know. So what? We're not going to use them to blast self-righteous assholes every day. Are we?"

Sandra smiled dreamily.

Alexander chewed the inside of his cheek. "Car batteries might actually work. And if we got a van and lined the back with the batteries . . ."

"Minivan's more discreet."

Carver pushed back from the table decisively. "I vote we go get a pizza. Plotting the overthrow of the imbeciles is making me hungry."

"Me too."

"Me too."

They started up the basement stairs. Micah patted Alexander on the back.

"Impressive work there, Alexander," he said. "Incredibly cool. Just don't forget the thunder."

"Thunder he wants," Alexander said, with a passable Jackie Mason accent.

The first target was chosen for maximum press. Ann Coulter was scheduled to give the commencement address at Brandeis, of all places. Sandra's innocuous Plymouth Grand Voyager, a tasteful, discreet forest green, was parked just behind Rosenthal Quad between an ABC van and a CBS van, with a clear view of the stage set up in Chapels Field.

"It just irks my soul that that waste of human flesh gets all this press," Sandra fumed inside the van. "She's a circus clown for the far right, doesn't everybody see that?"

"Press is what we want," Micah said. He squatted in the back next to a bank of car batteries and peeked out the smoked-glass rear window.

The day was brilliantly sunny, not a cloud in the sky. "Perfection," Sandra said. "We don't want anybody coming up with a rational explanation for what's about to happen, do we?"

"If it happens," Alexander mumbled.

"I have complete faith in you."

Micah pointed at a group of students holding signs, penned in near the Volen building by the campus police, well out of earshot of the festivities. "Somebody has the balls to protest the slut's appearance. Hey, we won't whack them by accident, will we?"

Alexander glanced out the window. "Looks like they're all wearing sneakers. Should be okay."

"You're kidding. Is that really what you're counting on to protect them?"

Sandra squinted out the driver's window toward the dais. "That skinny sack of pus is wearing heels. Four-inch heels!"

Alexander smiled. "Lovely."

"No, it's not lovely. Even in those heels she has no calves. Talk about chicken legs!"

"I mean their conductivity. She's not speaking yet, is she?"

"The dean's still introducing her. You don't think she'll do something unexpected, like speak rationally, do you?"

Micah shook his head severely. "No chance. Not in the nature of the beast."

"Don't worry. All we have to worry about is if this thing works and doesn't blow us all to kingdom come."

Micah and Sandra looked at Alexander with wide eyes.

"Here she comes."

Micah spun to the window. "Turn up the radio!"

"We're locked in on the PA system," Sandra said.

"When do we do it?" He tapped his fingers nervously against the dark glass.

Sandra pressed the earphone tight into her ear. "I'll know when I hear it. Just watch for my signal."

Alexander put one finger on the switch, and fixed his eyes on Sandra.

". . . I think the government should be spying on all Arabs, engaging in torture as a televised spectator sport, dropping daisy cutters wantonly throughout the Middle East and sending liberals to Guantanamo . . ."

"Ohmygod," Micah said. "Did those words come out of her mouth or her ass?"

"Ssh!"

". . . In the history of the nation, there has never been a political party so ridiculous as today's Democrats. It's as if all the brain-damaged people in America got together and formed a voting bloc . . ."

Alexander's finger twitched above the switch. Sandra furiously shook her head.

". . . I'd build a wall. In fact, I'd hire illegal immigrants to build the wall. And throw out the illegals who are here . . ."

"That's not very tactful," Micah said. "Isn't Brandeis's student body about 12% Hispanic?"

". . . before our country was hijacked by the liberal conspiracy that has sapped our strength . . ."

"Blah *blah* blah blah *blah* blah . . ."

"Micah!"

". . . I would like evolution to join the roster of other discredited religions, like the Cargo Cult of the South Pacific . . ."

Sandra's index finger stabbed at Alexander, "*Now!*"

He hit the switch.

*Flash!*



The van rocked. A crack as loud as the song of doom filled their ears, filled the skies, deafened them and everyone in Chapel Fields. When their startled nerves recovered, they could hear faint screaming. They rolled down the windows and stuck out their heads.

The microphone on the stage was a puddle of melted aluminum. The dean and provost, thrown backward out of their chairs, were just stumbling to their knees, their suits and faces blackened like Yosemite Sam after a miscalculation. And where Ann Coulter had stood a moment before, now there lay a pile of charred meat and bleached hair, smoking in the beautiful, unstained sunlight.

Sandra, Micah, and Alexander gaped at one another.

"Holy shit," Micah said at last. "Did we do that?"

"This could lead to drastic moral qualms," Alexander whispered.

"*No qualms!*" Sandra hissed. "No qualms! Not for us! We can't afford them. We have to be as ruthless as them. If they'd ever had qualms they wouldn't have taken over the body politic. If they'd ever questioned their beliefs, they couldn't be neoconservative fundies, could they?" She looked out the window again across Chapel Fields at the smoking heap on the stage. Robed grads were running, panicked, in all directions. Parents and grandparents stood with mouths hanging open. More than a few people had fainted. A siren sounded from far away.

"We have a mission," Sandra said grimly. "And we are going to fulfill that mission."

Suddenly she slumped back in her seat, overcome with the exhaustion of exaltation. Then she sat forward, turned the key in the ignition, shifted into gear.

"Now let's get the hell out of here. We'll just have to let the future sort it all out."

4.

"Did God zap other bad guys, daddy?"

Carver tucked the sheets around his adopted five-year-old son and patted them down.

"Honey, you know what happened. The next to go was the so-called Reverend Fred Phelps, a very, very bad man who said bad things about

dead people. He was struck by lightning while picketing a soldier's funeral. After that the whole Fox "News" staff got zapped, right on the air, after one of them made a joke about Iran being nuked by Israel and they all laughed. But they didn't laugh long. Then Karl Rove, who worked for the President, and a former representative, Tom DeLay, who was a big crook. And then the Vice President, while he was giving a speech to the American Enterprise Institute. And finally even the President of the United State himself got zapped, just as he was about to sign into law the bad old Traditional Marriage Act."

"Gee," the boy said. "God sure must have been mad at those guys."

Carver smiled. "Somebody sure was, love. But you know, people who lie about God to make themselves rich and powerful, people who think they have the right to tell other people how they have to live, well . . . somebody sure has to teach them a lesson. Because if there is a God who cares about people at all, you can bet he doesn't want them hurting each other for *any* reason, and he sure doesn't want them hurting people in His name.

"You see, a lot of people were all screwed up in how they thought about God. They had God mixed up with a lot of stupid ideas, like people who have dark skin aren't as good as people who have light skin . . ."

"But Uncle Alex is good as anybody!"

"Of course he is, of course he is. But some people didn't believe that, and because they didn't believe it, they tried to make it sound like God felt that way too. Other people thought that gays and lesbians were all child molesters—"

The little boy dropped his mouth incredulously.

"—or that everyone had to believe in their version of God. It wasn't entirely their fault. After all, they'd been told for years and years, by a lot of people who were supposed to be important, that God was just as nasty as they were. Those bad guys told a lot of lies to everybody, because then people would be scared and ask them what to do, and give them all their money, and make them famous. Of course, if everyone had just sat down to think about things, they would have understood immediately that it was all lies. But they didn't. A lot of people just don't know how to think about things, or they find it hard, or it scares them, or they're just too busy and too tired to really try to understand how things are. But that's

something we've all got to do — try to understand how things are. It's what makes us people, and not parrots."

The little boy giggled at the idea of people being parrots.

Carver tickled his stomach. "You don't want to be a parrot, do you?"

The boy laughed harder and kicked the covers loose. "No! I don't want to be a parrot!"

"You bet you don't! You want to be a real person."

The boy's laughter subsided to intermittent chortles.

"But see, when all these bad people started getting hit by lightning, and always just when they were saying something really nasty about God or nice folks . . . well, it confused all those poor folks. They had a hard time getting their ideas about God separate from all the lies and silliness they'd been told all their lives. They cried, they screamed, they got depressed. Some of them imploded."

The boy's eyes went wide. "People blew up, daddy?"

Carver smiled reassuringly. "Not really, not like a firecracker. But they blew up inside, inside their heads. Not all of them, because a lot of people always knew that God wasn't full of hate like the bad guys said. Those folks came out okay, eventually, when they got it all sorted out. But some of them never did sort it out, and they had to have medicine, and therapy, and had to be put in places where they couldn't hurt anybody, or themselves."

Carver noticed a shadow and turned to see Sandra in the bedroom doorway. She smiled at him.

"Anyway," Carver finished, "that was all a long time ago."

"How long?"

"Oh, a long time. Before you were even born and came to live with us."

"Wow." The boy savored this first intimation of how ancient the world must be.

"And right now I think it's getting pretty late and someone should be asleep."

The boy squealed, "You, daddy!"

"No, not me."

"You you you!"

"No, you!"

"No, you!"

Carver leaned down, gave his son a kiss, and pulled the blanket up under his chin. "Nighty-night, little guy."

"Night, daddy. Night, Aunt San."

"Sleep tight, little love."

Carver flicked out the light and walked Sandra back to the living room.

"That was so damned sweet I just about want to cry," Sandra said, and sank into a recliner.

"You are the least sentimental person I know."

"No, I mean it!"

"Yeah yeah."

Carver sat on the futon next to Micah and they slipped their arms around one another comfortably.

Sandra reached for her drink on the coffee table. "But all that God talk. Gives me the willies. I don't know that I like my godson hearing it."

Carver shrugged. "I never come out and say there's a big bearded boogeyman in the sky. I just don't shoot down the idea when he brings it up. It's something he can decide for himself later."

Micah nodded. "Push a kid in any direction and they are bound to push back. Better to leave it all up to him. And who's to say?"

Sandra rolled her eyes.

Micah patted Carver's belly. "I keep thinking about that last bit of cheesecake. Want some?"

Carver shook his head and reached for his own drink.

"San?"

"Not me! I have to pretend to have *some* willpower."

"Like you've ever lacked for that! Well, I'm past the point of caring about my expanding waistline. We're all too old to deny ourselves the pleasure." He gave Carver a peck on the cheek and heaved himself to his feet, then went to the kitchen.

Carver sipped his scotch. "Too bad Alexander couldn't make it."

"Dinner with us or presenting at a conference in Delhi — you make the choice." She plucked a sliver of ice out of her glass and sucked contentedly.

They sat quietly for a moment, a quiet that only comes between people who know each other as well as people can, and enjoy what they know.

Finally Carver said, "Telling him all those old stories starts me thinking."

"Dangerous."

Carver chuckled. "How does it make you feel?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"To have changed the world."

She rolled her eyes again.

"Don't pretend you don't think about it."

"Yeah, like all the time. And the damndest thing is, we can't even tell anybody!"

He nodded.

"Of course, it never would have happened if we hadn't managed to connect with Ariel in Jerusalem and Musab in ad-Dammam. So it's not like we're the gods."

Carver nodded again.

She settled back, glass nestled atop her breasts. "Frankly, a lot of the time it doesn't feel real. Because we can't talk about it, I suppose. Because nobody else knows. If nobody knows, did it really happen?"

"We know."

She nodded. "I still kind of regret having confirmed a lot of people in their beliefs, though," she said. "And the worst sort of belief. I mean, a god who strikes people down with lightning? It's so damned primitive."

Carver stretched and yawned.

"But what can you do?"

"You do the best you can," he said.

She smiled. "Like my grandmother liked to say. You do the best you can, and that's the best you can do." She listened for a moment to the quiet in the house, and the quiet outside the house. "We didn't do too badly, did we?"

They sat quietly again, marveling that they still existed at all, that humanity hadn't been nuked off the face of what was, after all, a beautiful place to live.

"Nope. Not too badly at all."

## Punch Play

Not a crime of passion, but a crime, almost, on a whim. A psychologist would grope for underlying psychosis, escalating neurosis. But it was simply impulse. She was nattering on about something Melissa had done, and he was slicing Muenster cheese for a sandwich, and her mouth was running on, and he really wasn't thinking of anything at all. But then he suddenly thrust the cheese knife into her seven times, and she fell, amazed and dead, and he went back to slicing cheese. It wasn't until he noticed how the Muenster was streaked with red that he realized just what he had done.

First to dispose of the body: a long afternoon's work with the knife and the garbage disposal, and keeping the kids out of the kitchen. "Mama's gone away," he told them. "Let's have frozen pizza for supper." But to co-workers at the corner tavern, "I never even knew she was unhappy till I read the note. Women, huh?" A round of beer for sympathy.

The police didn't bother to question. Mrs. Selman next door just shook her head and made consoling noises: she had seen it all on *The Young and the Restless* countless times.

In two weeks the children stopped asking questions. In three their only memory of their mother was of slightly better food than their father's canned cuisine.

Not long after this he was going over reports with his supervisor and, without warning, throttled him. Exiting at one door (with the reports) and re-entering at another, he screamed for help and fainted. No suspicion

fell on him. In a week a new supervisor had been appointed and business proceeded as usual.

Addicted now to cleverness, he began to actively seek out victims. The children were obvious first choices. One weekend, on the pretext of playing a new game, he tied them up in plastic trashbags and ate popcorn while the struggling grew feeble. "I saw a Trans Am peeling away," he told the school principal when she finally bothered to call. "I know she's taken them." He had practiced long and hard to get the tears right, and was annoyed to find them unnecessary.

Mrs. Selman brought over a tuna casserole for consolation. He kept her two days before he finally let her die. He took a vacation to Orlando, Florida, for a week, but when he returned his neighbor's disappearance was still unnoticed. In a fit of pique he set fire to a day-care center and left suggestive pamphlets behind incriminating a pro-abortion women's organization.

Though filled with manic glee, he was aware of the possibility that he might be out of control.

The story of the burned babies was a two-paragraph filler on an inside column. He fell into a funk. He watched television ceaselessly and recorded the channels he was not watching for later. The smell from the basement waxed fruity. During a station identification break he tried to run some vienna sausages down the disposal, but they joined into three fat little cartoon hands and crawled up out of the grinder toward him. He beat them away and mashed them into paste. Spread on toast, this was his breakfast.

A friend from work telephoned, "Hey buddy, where've you been the last month?" He wept with gratitude at being noticed and invited his friend over for a beer. "Hey buddy, what a smell!" The offered beer had cyclamen in it. Before the poison could start its work he showed his friend his collection of corpses in the basement. "Hey buddy, what a mess. You gone bonkers or what?" Cyclamen is a wicked poison, and it took his friend a long, painful time to die. He bundled the twisted remains in another heavy-duty trashbag and placed it neatly beside the three small ones that had now shrunk even smaller and were fuzzy and sticky.

One night as he was sitting in the basement smoking a pipe, refreshed and relaxed, he saw the trashbags flutter, and from them came whispers.

Another night he returned from the office, upset that there seemed to be no rumors, and found the four trash bags dancing in his living room. The furniture had been pushed aside to make room.

Ghostly vengeance was a concept preferable to utter madness, and he set about to correct the matter. He bought a gross of silver crucifixes wholesale at the religious supply shop, along with copies of the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran (or Qu'ran), and a few cheap paperbacks by Stephen King. He hammered the crosses into the concrete basement floor in two concentric circles around the disordered trashbags and papered the walls of his house with pages torn from the holy and unholy books. That night he fell asleep to the soothing lullaby of four muffled voices singing in sweet harmony a medley of old hymns and half-remembered spirituals.

On the evening news, wedged between a 30-second brief on the President's speech to striking railroad workers and a tummy-toner commercial, was a story of an interesting massacre in Southern California. He berated himself for not having come up with anything as original.

Next morning he removed the license plates from his car and drove to a local school just before recess time. As the children and teachers issued forth from the building he gunned his engine and drove into the schoolyard. He was able to catch at least twelve kids. As the remainder raced screaming into the school, he climbed out of his car and retrieved three of the mangled little bodies and tossed them into the back seat. He then drove to an automated car wash and gave himself up to the restful roar of water jets. When the car was clean, but unchamoised, he drove to another school. It was now lunchtime, and he repeated himself, with greater results. This time he pitched four tiny bodies into the back seat before he heard the sirens. The car wash attendant did not seem surprised at his customer's red-smeared return.

So he finally made the news. But the times of the attacks were off by several minutes, and the descriptions of his car were completely wrong ten times over. Two total strangers received credit for his imagination.

In a rage, he stomped out of the house and went to a nearby nursing home, where he slit the throats of two dying old men. Somewhat mollified, he returned home to find eleven trashbags lined up along the curb. He frowned. It was not trash day.



The trashbags rolled toward him, leaving puddles on the concrete. He calmly drove over them again and again, squish pop crack. He left his car and went inside. A beer seemed called for. But something was climbing out of the garbage disposal.

He thought it might be time to leave.

He packed a suitcase and his copy of *The Criminal Use of False Identification* and left his bedroom. Eleven trashbags, split and leaking now, and various odds and ends blocked his path to the door.

He did not panic. He turned on the television and waited. Eventually the sticky plastic lumps shuffled toward the television and piled themselves before it. A slimy trail of something slid out of the kitchen and joined them.

He smiled and slipped out of the house.

It was several weeks before anyone noticed that he was gone.

# The Darkness of the Heart

## *An Erotic Melodrama*

### SCENE I.

“All that keeps us from falling to the level of these savages is will, my dear.”

Madame Kurz studied the pretty, empty face of the young woman who sat before her. She had turned out well after a bath, a night’s sleep in a clean bed, and two good meals. The dark stains beneath her eyes would fade in another day or two; kohl would mimic them thereafter — the hint of decadence enhanced an illusion of purity provided by the clear skin, green eyes, hair the color of red gold.

Madame Kurz’s eyes were merely blue. “You are young — your will is unformed and weak,” Madame Kurz continued. “This may change as you mature, but in the meantime you are here in my employ and will take orders from me. This is understood?”

The young woman kept her voice carefully free of weariness. “Yes, Madame.”

“I may seem harsh to you at times. I may make demands you will wince to obey. But believe me, I have my reasons for all I do.”

“Yes, Madame.”

Madame Kurz ran a finger along the buttons of her bodice: Madame Elspeth Kurz, née Carriere, was a tightly buttoned woman. Despite the heat of Port-au-Prince — her favorite topic and annoyance — she kept her stays, lacings, hooks, and buttons firmly fastened, in that righteous

manner peculiar to the bourgeoisie. For her, a button undone was a door ajar through which disaster would surely creep. She knew too well how easily a moral character might melt under the dull tropic sun and the lazy opportunity of a moment. (She did not consider how the ease of such a fall reflected on the balanced virtue of the culture she guarded so zealously.) She smoothed her scarlet gown and folded her hands — the only parts of herself whose age she could not disguise — tightly together in her lap. “My only wish is to protect us all from the dangers of this place.” She spoke with a rehearsed passion, like an actress late in a performance that had run too long. “Port-au-Prince can bring strange ideas to those not accustomed to its ways, its heat, its savage peoples.” She sighed. “Civilized minds were never meant for such a climate. But here we are, and we must do our duty.”

“Yes, Madame.” The young woman expertly stifled a threatening yawn.

“Where are you from, my dear?”

“Marseilles, madame.”

“And when did you come here?”

“I landed Tuesday week.”

“How did you fare in those . . . eight days?” Her yet handsome face carried an expression of sympathetic interest schooled in the years of her vocation as procuress.

The young woman spoke utterly without emotion. “I did what I had to do, madame.”

“And, I trust, no more. However they may have appeared to you at the time, you have my assurance your troubles were negligible.” Madame Kurz glanced through the mosquito netting that draped the open French windows and muffled the leaden afternoon light. The trees had been felled to the west and north of the town to make way for the crush of civilization, leaving wide spaces of emptiness uglier than the swaths of ancient lava flows; but here the rot and fertility of the earth was barely kept secured beyond man’s bounds. A gilded carriage moved outside on a street lined with the rank growth of jungle trees and vines, punctuated with giant, fleshy-petalled blossoms beclouded in their own drugged perfumes. This juxtaposition of the wild and the urbane sickened her. “I have lived on this island for seventeen years, child. I have seen all the

horrors of change, horrors your young mind cannot imagine. The last few years have brought us terrible troubles.” She turned back to the young woman and smiled sadly. “You are new to our shores; allow me to explain. The society of this nation is divided into two groups of people: those who would build and preserve decorum, order, and the finer things in life; and those whose every action is determined to destroy that carefully preserved decorum, to replace order with chaos, to befoul the few civilized beauties we have managed to rescue from the greedy jungle. These enemies of culture, they attempt to ennoble their violence with such terms as ‘liberty,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘the rights of man.’ I can scarcely regard them as human, they are so inimical to all that is truly human! They raise a torch, as they put it, to light mankind’s way to the future, then hurl that torch upon us and scorch us in their bright hope of progress! I have seen that fire shine above the trees as rich homes burned to ashes, while I fought to keep this house of mine standing whole. I have seen fine men of high breeding, and women, too, slaughtered like cattle when the mob roared through the streets in a rage of ‘progress.’ We beat them down with whip and sword; in the old days the dread of our wrath would have been sufficient to keep them in their place. But dangerous notions are in the air. Now we must continually show our strength, prove ourselves. It is coarse, but necessary. You may believe me, change has not been for the good. Change is always evil.” She placed one hand lightly upon the young woman’s shoulder. “You may count yourself lucky that I happened upon you, my dear. Who knows what might befall a defenseless woman of our kind, alone, in these dreadful days?”

“Who indeed, madame.”

Madame Kurz seated herself again. “I am one of the walls against the barbarians on this island.” She cocked an eyebrow with bitter humor. “Some of our leading citizens might dispute that statement, but their husbands know better. My establishment serves the elite of Port-au-Prince and their honored guests. By presenting to them only the most fascinating, most cultured, most civilized ladies for their pleasure, I keep their passions, which might otherwise be tempted to more degrading pastimes, firmly in check.”

“Of course, madame.”

"When I heard you singing outside the tavern, I thought you might prove an asset to me, and, of course, I to you. You have a lovely voice, which will be useful in our entertainments. My entertainments are very popular among the finer element of Port-au-Prince. If you wish, I will have M. Armontigne give you lessons. You would like that, wouldn't you, my dear?"

The young woman could not completely conceal her lack of excitement. "Yes, madame, I would like that."

Madame Kurz noted her tone, but kept impatience out of her own voice with the air of one putting out an importunate cat. "M. Armontigne is a very cultured gentleman. I have had him as tutor to several of my ladies. If you are diligent, I have no doubt he will make great improvement in you. An appreciation of music is one of the most beneficial influences."

At this moment Madame Kurz became aware of the beating of drums. The music was damped by distance, but the insistence of the rhythm carried clearly. The island was thudding with a quiet pulse, scarcely noticeable unless one held one's ears shut with two fingers. It touched the young woman's blood, which stumbled in its pace, uncertain, then fell into the compelling rhythm. She sat up at the sound, and into her green eyes came a spark of life that all Madame Kurz's promises of improvement had failed to kindle.

Madame Kurz repressed an impulse to slam the windows shut; it was, of course, too hot. Instead, she rose and crossed to the table that held her candy box. She was gratified to note that the purring of her skirts did much to drown the rumble of drums, and with the graceful motion of a duelist delivering a fine *coup d'avance*, she raised the ivory lid of the antique music box and allowed the tinny harmonies of "Per la gloria d'adorarvi" to fill the room. She took out a bonbon, sniffed it, held it for a moment as if considering, then gave a quick shake of her head and replaced it. But she left the box open, determined to risk the exposure of her sweets to humidity in return for the calm beauty of the music.

Without turning, she said, "As I mentioned, we who believe in the worth of our kind are unfortunately forced to prove ourselves to those who would rape us of our position. You understand, my dear, that boundaries must be preserved if we are to hold our proper place here."

The young woman, who had almost imperceptibly leaned forward in her chair in a vain attempt to hear that distant beat, did not start, but sat back once more and breathed softly.

"These boundaries I shall explain to you carefully; these boundaries must be observed absolutely."

"Yes, madame."

Madame Kurz's voice dropped to the baritone of a lyceum lecturer. This was a world where words multiplied like colorful fungi, where sentences grew long and rank and twining as the jungle vines and sprouted violently hued flowers of wild metaphor. As a corrective and example against the native lush verbiage, Madame Kurz trimmed her speech as neatly as a formal garden, clipped her paragraphs into pretty, artificial geometries, arranged her topics, explications, digressions with the precision of a Versailles footpath.

"Rabelais has shown us where unbridled desire must lead us," she said. "When the whole of the law is 'do what thou wilt,' there can be no order, no progress, and thus no beauty and no art. For who can say what is beautiful if there is nothing that can be pointed to and justly defined as ugly? Order makes art possible, ugliness makes beauty visible, as surely as it is the darkness that makes us know light. In the darkness of this place my house shines as a beacon — no, more accurately, as an altar's flame, to light the icon of Holy Culture." She closed her eyes a moment with satisfaction at her turn of phrase. "But this ugliness, this darkness, must be kept to its proper, subordinate place. True, to attract important men, to draw their attention so that I may confirm in them the respect for all that denotes civilization, which is innate within them but which must be kept alert by the proper stimuli, I must offer sops to their all too human desires. But I offer to them only those lures appropriate to their dignity, most carefully chosen to further my true purpose." She frowned. "There are others on this island who take in any girl with a pretty face and figure — greedy, dangerously complacent men and women whose only ambition is what they can coax from the pockets of sailors, laborers, the lower order of merchants. They laugh at me, I know, make a joke of my particularity. But I tell you, my dear, their girls are kept in a state of ignorance, turned into cattle, made stupid and giggling, given nothing to do but gossip and oil their dark skins, and devise ever more obscene

diversions. In my house I watch over you as . . ." she smiled, "as Vesta watched over the Roman virgins who tended her eternal flame. My ladies are indeed attendants in a temple. I will teach you. You will study, you will grow capable of refined conversation. Can you read and write, my dear?"

"I can write my name to sign it," Angélique said. She seemed to blush at this admission.

Madame Kurz nodded. "I shall make it my special duty to teach you to read. You have a lovely voice, and reading verse shall improve it."

Once again she modulated to businesslike tones, betraying the coyness of her words. "Naturally, in our work we must accommodate the . . . foibles, if you will, of our clients. You are not squeamish."

The young woman almost managed a smile. "Not any longer, Madame Kurz."

"Good." Madame Kurz stepped quietly behind her and ran a finger lightly over the young woman's thick hair. The young woman did not turn or move in any way. "You seem obedient, my dear; I'm sure we'll manage together splendidly. So," and she returned to her own chair, "while making allowances for their foibles, as we have chosen to call them, we must never — I trust you attend me, child — we must *never* allow ourselves to slip the smallest fraction into true degradation. For in such a place . . . in such *heat* . . ." her left hand, decorated with a small ruby set in a gold band, rose to her bosom and patted it gently twice, "the smallest slip must speed into the most fearful fall."

The spark was gone from the young woman's eyes and she spoke once more with the slur of exhaustion. "I understand, Madame Kurz."

"I hope you do, my dear, I hope you do. You're feeling well again? You ate and slept comfortably."

"Yes, thank you, madame."

"Very well, you may return to your room. We'll talk again at coffee."

The young woman took a breath as if for supreme effort, then stood. She was tall, taller even than Madame Kurz. Her shoulders were broad, and the muscles of her graceful arms were plainly visible under the white muslin of the dress. But the obvious strength of her body was betrayed by an impotence of decision; the heat, or life, had worn away her ability to act, rather than respond. Her long legs moved beneath her skirts with

mechanical plodding, her feet barely rose above the polished floor to slide forward, her hands hung lifelessly at her sides without feeling the softness of her borrowed dress, without feeling the blood that pooled and pounded in her limp fingertips.

The shadows of two men in wide-brimmed straw hats passed the shrouded windows, but her eyes scarcely moved to follow them.

As she passed Madame Kurz on her way to the door, the older woman reached up, touched her cheek lightly, and puzzled at its chill rigidity. "What is your name again, my dear?"

The music box slowed and stopped on an unresolved chord.

"Angélique, madame." She looked down and saw for the first time the thin strand of gray hidden in Madame Kurz's carefully turned coiffure.

"Very good. Angélique. Lovely."

Before Angélique could reach her hand toward the knob, there came a knock at the door.

## SCENE 2.

Madame Kurz scowled pettishly. "Who can that be? Come in."

Angélique stepped back involuntarily as the door opened and two black men entered. They wore cheap gingham shirts with full sleeves. Their trousers were of black stuff, patched with many different materials, so that they appeared almost to be in carnival costume. The elder, a man perhaps no older than Madame Kurz but appearing fifteen years older at least — his hair dusted with white, his face etched with the lines of long years of backbreaking work, still handsome with the strength of its jaw, the noble arc of nose and breadth of brow — wore a great red kerchief bound about his neck, and when he pulled his hat off his head before he entered through the door, one saw that his right hand was missing its last two fingers. The younger was black as a carved piece of the midnight sky. His boots were old but shiny, he carried a whip at his belt. He was shorter than his companion, and broader in chest and shoulder, smooth and bursting with youthful manhood. His hands were huge, unmaimed, ready to grasp and hold with obstinate will. His neck was thick and seemed solid and unbending as the deep-rooted trunk of an ebony tree; his faded shirt was open to reveal the deep cleft of a powerful breast; on his



exposed calves one might note the old purple wounds of the whip. From him came a distinct odor of rummy sweat, and when he moved the clink of glass bottles in his pocket could be heard.

This young man glanced briefly at Madame Kurz, then up at the woman who stood behind her, pressed now against the netted windows. He breathed a great rum-scented breath at the sight of her. Only then did he remove his hat from his head.

Angélique studied them both, gauging them as rapidly and surely as a beast. The old man was harmless to her, too tamed to present any danger. But the young one — those hands could break and rip as easily as . . . then she looked into his black, black eyes, and something pounced upon her with the force of a thousand boulevard ballads. She quelled it instantly and looked out the window to break its power.

“Ma’am Kurz,” the elder man said diffidently.

Madame Kurz with an unconscious sweep of her hand settled her skirt gracefully about her. “Minoré. What are you doing here?”

“Missa Heinemann tell me to come, he send you money.” He held out an envelope stuffed thick with currency. From where she stood Madame Kurz could see her name written on it in Heinemann’s enormous, childish lettering.

“Ah.” She accepted the packet from Minoré. “Mr. Heinemann is *so* thoughtful. Even in these harsh days he pays his debts promptly.” She turned to Angélique with quiet pride. “You see how I am regarded.” Then she looked back to the men and the smile faded into sharp demand. “And who is this boy?”

“He want to come to town with me, Ma’am,” Minoré said with a grin. “He say that he going to buy himself two bottle o’ rum, that right, Dieudonné?” The young man did not respond. “Hey, Dieudonné!”

The young man did not take his eyes from Angélique, but put his hand to the pocket where the bottles tinkled gently against one another. “Yes, Ma’am, one for me and one for my maman.”

Madame Kurz had placed the money in a deep pocket hidden in her skirt. “Well, come with me.” She rose. “Tell me, Minoré, what are those drums? It’s not holiday today.”

The young man suddenly whirled on Madame Kurz, eager as a child with the news. "Yes, Ma'am, it is big holiday for my people! Today the governor, he tell us we be free. No more slave!"

Perhaps it was only a cloud that covered the sky then, but the room darkened before the expression on Madame Kurz's face: her eyes were suddenly setting suns rimmed with fire, her lips parted slightly, amazingly pale beneath their rouge. When she spoke, her voice was low, a choked whisper. "No more slaves?" she said. And louder, "No more slaves?" Then her voice fell again in despair at this fresh evidence of men's blindness. "Is it come so soon?"

Dieudonné fairly beat his big chest with joy. "Yes, Ma'am, governor tell the masters, and the masters tell us. My people, we dance and sing and beat the big drums for the joy of it. That's why I go to buy the rum for my maman."

"Is big news, Ma'am Kurz," said Minoré. "Some of my men, they are scared o' what might come if the masters say it no, they run off into the hills. But Missa Heinemann, he is a good man, he is not upset about anything. He is not upset with the people, Ma'am."

"Dreadful!" She spit the bitter word between her teeth and began to pace about the room, from door to window to window to wall. "They talked and talked of it, but I never believed them so stupid as to do it." Dieudonné scowled, but she of course took no notice. "Whyever have they given in? We beat them back before. They know what happened when it was tried before. The King had more sense than all of them, he put it back in place and made all secure! What will come of the planters now? How will they ever be able to keep their land?"

"But the governor tell them, Ma'am," Dieudonné said. "The governor tell them, and they got to do what the governor say. Just like we always do what they say," he added darkly.

"They'll lose the land. The sugar will go, and with it the money. It will be the ruin of us all. You mind what I say, *the ruin of us all!*"

Minoré spoke, desperately conciliatory. "No, Ma'am, I think it is good thing. Missa Heinemann, he make me free two years ago when he make me foreman for the place, an' I still work hard, hard like any man he own. But the workers, they are glad like Christmas that they finally be free."

"Free! Free to starve."

"We starve now," Dieudonné said.

Madame Kurz rushed on. "Free to laze about, to leave your work and make paupers of us all!"

"Ma'am," Minoré pleaded, "my people are good people! Even when the boats don't come and they got no food, even when Missa Heinemann don't remember to order the cloth and we go around in our rags like the animals, even then we work hard like we should. Now, when they get paid for the work, my people work even harder. They are proud to provide for themselves, Ma'am, with the money they earn."

Her fists beat gently against her corset as she paced. "Oh, the stupid, stupid men! Always playing with their great, dangerous toys, tugging and pulling until they break and fall apart, crushing whoever stands beneath! Do they have no memory? No sense? All their profound schooling, all their proud abilities, and they hurl them off at the first new notion that floats past. Oh, I know these men! I've made enough money helping them uphold their careful masks. I thought I could check their foolishness, distract them with beautiful things, guide them with their own lusts into the proper way. But they are puling babies, they are babies without the most remote sense of control in their selfish, filthy, fearful souls! There is only one way to keep the world in its proper order," she said with appalling strength, "and that is to hold the barbaric down. Drive it down! Beat it down! To let it loose is to open our arms to annihilation!"

Dieudonné, bored with her furious speech, had turned back to look at the one thing in this richly decorated room that interested him. He approached a few steps toward the tall and beautiful woman in the white dress and said with something like reverence, "You a new girl in this house, mam'selle? Oh, you are very pretty."

Madame Kurz spun on him, eyes uncontrolled and wide, hands clutching her skirt spasmodically so that they would not rise to strike out. "Shut up this instant!" she hissed. "Whatever this day may bring, you remember your place! Angélique, get upstairs!"

Silence held them the space of a single beat of a calm man's heart. Angélique would have moved, but shock at the vehemence of her employer's words held her pinned to the wall. Minoré would have moved, but his desire to intervene was met and vanquished by his years

of fear of speaking against a white person. Madame Kurz stood, surprised by the depths of her rage.

Dieudonné did not trust himself to move, and so he only clenched his great fists and said quietly between his teeth, "I remember my place, Ma'am. I remember it all the time. I remember how I am born 'cause Missa Heinemann he want another worker. I remember how my daddy die 'cause Missa Heinemann make more money working him than feeding him or getting a doctor when he is sick. I remember cutting sugar cane when I am only a little baby, slicing my hands on the sharp cane, and the old foreman hitting me if I don't jump every time he snap the finger. I remember I go hungry when planting the cane, the hardest work of all, 'cause Missa Heinemann forget to buy us corn and beans. Yes, Ma'am, I remember my place." His voice fell even lower, and only the fervor of his words made them audible. "I remember everything."

Madame Kurz did not, could not speak.

Minoré overcame his dread and stepped between the woman and the man. He fixed a sickly smile on his face and opened his hands before her, as a dog might roll on its back before a larger, hostile beast. "It is a good thing, Ma'am, it surely is. We all work hard, we work very hard, harder now we are all free, you'll see. A man works harder when he is treated like a man."

Somewhat recovered, and oddly ashamed of her demonstration of emotion, Madame Kurz turned her back to them. "Madness!" she said.

Minoré sensed the ebb of her anger and spoke with full knowledge of her in his words. "A man works harder when he is getting paid what he is worth. You know. You always tell me how your people work with each other to be rich. People, even my people, they want to be treated like people, not like the cattle. Buying an' selling people, Ma'am, it don't seem right in a civilized place."

"Buying and selling people *is* civilization!" She was quite pleased with her impromptu aphorism. "There's no such thing as freedom in this world, Minoré, nor should there be. We all of us wear chains. Even the richest planter on the island is slave to the market's whim."

Dieudonné seemed as if he would smile; but it would be a bitter, sneering smile if he let it appear. "Yes, she is right, Missa Minoré. Free or slave, we still are going to be bought and sold. We are still going to be

cutting the cane. We still make money for Missa Heinemann.” He looked at Angélique. “We all still make money for *somebody*.”

Minoré grinned weakly. “It is good thing, Ma’am Kurz!”

In the doorway behind the black men there appeared a handsome woman with hair dark as Dieudonné’s skin, dressed in a chemise cut low upon her breast. She entered with the thoughtlessly poetic motion of a lazy, pampered animal. Madame Kurz started at the interruption.

“Barbara! What are you doing downstairs before dinner?”

The woman passed by her with no sign of care. “It’s too hot upstairs.” She looked the two men up and down, then moved to the chair Madame Kurz had used, pulled it to the window, and lounged in it, legs stretched out before her, to catch whatever hint of breeze might enter.

Madame Kurz stood still a moment, hesitating between the desire to punish this flagrant insubordination and her suffocating need to leave the scene of her loss of self-control. At last the lack of air drove her at a near run through the door and away down the corridor. Minoré hurried after her, and snapped his fingers for Dieudonné to follow. Dieudonné waited yet a moment, his eyes on Angélique. Then he gave the two whores a broad, arrogant grin and ambled away after the others.

### SCENE 3.

Angélique had patiently half-listened as Madame Kurz expounded the virtues of her notion of reality, well aware that these notions were as illusory as any native fable spinner’s; true enough to do, perhaps, in some cool northern place, but comical and improbable among the brilliant colors and nauseating perfumes of this island. She of course had betrayed no such thoughts, for the one true fact of this present moment both of them would agree upon was that Madame Kurz had given her shelter and food in return for the use of her youth and beauty and complaisance.

Now she wondered what would be the safest course of action: to return upstairs to the heat of her small room, obeying Madame Kurz’s command, or to remain here in this rather cooler, more comfortable place in the hope of learning what might be needful. She regarded the other woman uncertainly for a long moment; then, as if she had at last made a decision, she sat stiffly in the other chair. For a long while they sat in

silence. The dark woman fanned herself languidly with the skirt of her chemise. The sun, so broad and flat, a-throb with the dull heat of a banked furnace, moved a breath from zenith toward fall; the glare dimmed but the close heat increased perceptibly. Gradually Angélique relaxed from her rigid posture: she sat back, then dropped her shoulders, then inclined her head slightly to her left shoulder, and finally slumped down in her seat and stretched out her long legs, kicking off her slippers, so that she was positioned not unlike the dark woman who sat before her.

Still without looking at her, Barbara spoke. "And what's your story, little girl?" There was affected world-weariness in that melodious voice, and under it a suggestive, smiling mockery.

Angélique took her cue and shrugged dismissively. "I came over serving a rich woman, but her husband took a fancy to me and the bitch threw me off the boat here. Yours?"

"Same as anyone's, I guess. A rough life," she gave a short laugh, "like anybody ever had it smooth."

"And . . . her?" She nodded at the door whence Madame Kurz had exited, though Barbara still did not look at her.

"Kurz? No story. No story at all. She's conquered history, that one has, stared it down so it wouldn't dare talk back to her. Don't ask her questions, if you know what's good for you, or the door'll close and you'll be on the other side of it."

"Anything I ought to know?"

"She's got her own fancies. If she wants you to know about 'em, she'll tell you herself."

The women sat quietly another while, thinking not at all in the heat of the room. The sun's fractured reflection from the long, gilt-framed mirror moved across the walls and ceiling like the sparkled ticking of a clock.

"What are the men like?" Angélique asked at last.

"What are men ever like?"

Angélique stretched one foot with studied nonchalance. "I mean the ones that come here. Like those two?" She did not look up from her foot.

Barbara suddenly laughed and now turned to look at Angélique with knowing eyes. "Keep your eyes off boys like that here. Kurz doesn't pander to the likes of them! She'd see 'em all hanged, or worse, if she had her way. Where do you think you are? What black man ever had money

to pay for women like us? It's at the other end of this road, down where the ships dock, that you'll find their women. The ones we climb under are the dried-out old plantation owners and importers — the ones with the money."

Angélique sighed. "Are they all old?"

Barbara turned away again. "Does it make any difference?"

"It's easier to bear, I think, if the man is halfway young, and halfway . . . solid."

"It's easiest if you can't notice 'em at all. If they can't make you feel." Her voice moved up and down with perfect modulation and expressed nothing but its own training. "In Boston it was too much, I felt . . . everything. But down here it's so damned hot it's all I can do to stay awake. I'm a better whore here in Haiti than I was in Boston: here I don't feel anything. Not anything at all." And she stretched pleasantly and fully.

Angélique frowned. "I don't think I want that." She still looked at her foot, covered in a white silk slipper embroidered with tiny purple pansies, given to her the night before by the woman who now commanded her life and comfort.

"Want it or not, you'll wind up just like me, if you're smart."

Angélique's frown turned bitter as she allowed her thoughts some liberty. "That boy was right: free or slave, it's all just buying and selling. Buying and selling. And we are what gets sold. The master bought me to serve his wife and his fancies, and pitiful fancies they were. And when the wife finds out what he's up to, off I'm sent without a sou or a fond farewell, in a humid hole like this where all we can do is sell ourselves again and again, at whatever price we can fetch. He's right. And we're no better than them, whatever color we are. Worse." She looked up. "They've been freed."

"Freed? Yes, I heard they might be. Worse luck for them, without anyone responsible to them. If they were smart they'd stick right where they were, and have a better chance of regular meals." Barbara shrugged. "Take off one chain, put on two more. No one's better off than anyone else. You think they'll have it all cushions and pastries because the governor makes a speech? There's too much money trading hands for

that. Freedom's just a bit of breath and a hum. All we can hope for is a looser collar."

Angélique rose and walked to the window. Her shadow fell over Barbara. She looked out across the veranda, with its elegant chairs and tables, pictured the gentlemen taking brandy and sherry in the night, smoking black cigars, gathering their strength before leaving Madame Kurz's house for their grand places in the city or on the plantations. The night was what this house was built for, she thought. It shouldn't exist in day. It should be folded up and hidden somewhere out of the light. She wondered idly if Madame Kurz, or Barbara, or anyone had had such thoughts.

She gazed up the hillside at the extravagant growth of the jungle, the great-leaved trees, the poisonously bright flowers, the tangled brush, the deep, velvet shadows hidden in the green. The shimmer of humid air gave the wild luxuriance a slow, deliberate motion, like the prodding of the antennae of a mass of insects. The heat seemed to debate whether it should scuttle forward with a stealthy sound, a sound like that of those drums, to creep over her and stifle her under its hot belly.

Barbara studied Angélique's narrow shoulders. She rose slowly and stood behind her.

"Still, I think I like a young man better," Angélique said softly. "Young and strong, with a face you can look into without . . ."

Barbara stood so close that her warm breath stirred the fine, pale hairs on the back of Angélique's neck. Angélique did not turn, did not move at all. Through the wet, hot air came the low rumble of hinted thunder, as compelling as drums.

"Listen," she said. "Thunder."

Barbara almost whispered. "Yes. It storms every night here."

Angélique glanced up at the sky uncertainly. "But the sun's shining."

"There'll be a storm, just the same."



## Scene 4.

Madame Kurz's office was on the east side of her house, where she would not be disturbed in her work by the blaze of the afternoon sun. It was small and, in stark contrast to the rest of the house, simply furnished with only a large but finely constructed writing table, three chairs with rose silk cushions, and a small cabinet with a lock to hold her money and private papers; the only objects of ornamentation were a tasseled shade for the lamp and a small framed engraving of Louis XV hung on the wall beside the door: the effect was sophisticated but spartan, in keeping with her firm notions of the atmosphere proper to the conduct of business.

She entered the room briskly and seated herself at the desk. The two men remained in the doorway, Minoré with his hat still in his hands at his breast, as though he were making a perpetual petition. Dieudonné leaned against the jamb. His thumbs were thrust into the waist of his patched trousers. His hat was again fixed firmly on his head, set at an impudent angle; the wide brim concealed one black eye in its shadow.

Madame Kurz took a sheet of paper, which was delicately tinted a rose somewhat lighter than that of the cushion of the chair she sat in. She trimmed the nib of her pen, dipped it in the ink, and in practiced, flowing letters wrote her receipt for the money sent by M. Heinemann. When she was finished, she scattered sand on the page and took out a fresh sheet. "If you will wait another moment, Minoré, I will send with you also an invitation to your master for an entertainment I am giving a week from Saturday." She took the liberty of writing directly to M. Heinemann, for he was a widowed gentleman and there was no resentful wife to cause difficulties.

"Master," Dieudonné muttered, and gave a quick snort of laughter.

Madame Kurz paused, but let this pass. Minoré said quickly, "I am happy to wait for you, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Minoré."

She quickly wrote her invitation, and for the few moments of writing almost forgot the dread news of the day in thoughts of her entertainment: the music she had chosen, the costumes still being sewn, the manner in which she would dress the girls' hair — the accoutrements of civilized amusements. Then the note was done, and with it her reverie. She sanded

the paper, slipped the sand off the page back into the teak shakebox, then folded the two pages together in an intricate figure and struck a match to light the small spirit lamp with which to melt her sealing wax.

"Minoré," she said easily, "if I might, I would give you a word of advice."

"Oh, yes, Ma'am," Minoré said.

She dripped hot wax on the folded paper, waited for it to set, then pressed down her ivory seal, copy of a Greek original. She waved it delicately in the humid air. "This disturbing news you have brought me . . . I trust you see the danger it forebodes — for all of us, and most especially for you and your people."

Dieudonné stood straighter, his handsome face settled into a scowl.

"I will not rehearse the events of the last few years in this island, for you know them as well as I. The frightful violence, the high cost of order restored . . . You know how fiercely those battles were fought, how fiercely our men crushed the revolts that hazarded their lives and livelihoods. Minoré, I have known you many years, and you have never to my knowledge allowed your passions to run away with you. I appeal now to your stability," she did not glance at the younger man, "and dispassionate reason. Can you truly think that a mere word from the governor will change the hearts and minds of our men instantly? Minoré," she carefully addressed only the older man, "you know the rage that burns in every man's breast when his interest is threatened. I speak to you, Minoré, with the affection of our long acquaintance. Beware, Minoré."

"Oh, yes, Ma'am, thank you, Ma'am," Minoré said.

Dieudonné growled angrily, "Governor made us free!"

"And if you have that one's interests at heart," she said gently, pointing at Dieudonné as though he were some suspect species of reptile, "you will make him curb that temper of his before it proves too inviting to those more powerful than he."

"Lady," Dieudonné growled.

"I am not speaking to you," Madame Kurz said sharply.

Minoré pleaded, "Dieudonné—"

"You can't talk at us no more like we are dogs to sit up for food when you say so!"

"Dieudonné!" Minoré cried with dismay.

Madame Kurz rose suddenly, her powdered face aflame with released outrage. "Minoré! Take that boy out of my house this instant!"

"*I am no boy!*" Dieudonné's voice rang with the true metal of angered masculinity. "I am a man like any man! More a man than the old ones you send to bed with your pretty women here!"

"I forbid you to speak!" Madame Kurz shrieked.

"No man is better than me now! I'm good like any man, and smarter than you white people! The planters turn all the land over to the sugar cane, and don't even grow their own food, so when the ships don't come they go hungry almost as bad as we do. They don't give us any decent place to live, they don't give us food, they don't give us clothes to wear, only little bits of cloth to sew up any way we can. Then they work us worse than horses, beat us so we bleed, and we die, Ma'am, we die, we die young and worn out, so they don't get but a few years' work out o' us. Oh, very great people, yes! Smart rich men, oh yes! But now I'm good like any o' them, and smarter than all o' them. I show you! I show you, lady!" He stepped forward and dropped his voice into a threatening sneer. "Now we are not slaves, they must pay us money for the work we do, and when they pay me I'm going to bring my money here, Ma'am, yes! I will bring my money here like any man, and I throw it at your feet and take that pretty woman with the red hair! I pay for her, and I take her, and I prove to all o' you what kind o' man I am!"

"Get out! Damn you, *get out!*"

Dieudonné's hand went instinctively to the whip that hung at his belt, but Minoré grabbed hold of him with terror.

Dieudonné laughed, laughed loud and harsh, into her pale, horror-stricken face. Then he turned and ran, and Madame Kurz ran after him. With her hair falling loose from its tight bindings and streaming behind her, and with her face pale with rage, her eyes goggling, her hands clawed to hold up her skirt, she resembled a fury in pursuit of the matricide.

The hallway from her office led directly to the rear door of the house, but Dieudonné turned the opposite direction and ran back, booming with wild laughter, to the room where Angélique and Barbara stood at the window. The two women leaped apart at the noise of pounding footsteps,

and then Dieudonné burst into the room. He skidded to a halt, his big boots marking the polished floor. He stood still as though caught in surprise, breathing oppressively, and stared at the women.

Then came the racing tap tap of Madame Kurz's shoes. Dieudonné turned, listened, turned back, smiled hugely, and swept off his hat in parody of a courtly gentleman's bow. "Pretty ladies!" he shouted. "I see you again sometime!" And with that he ripped aside the mosquito netting and bounded through the window. The women stuck their heads out and watched as he crashed into the thick jungle and vanished into green darkness.

### SCENE 5.

Madame Kurz burst into the room, Minoré close behind her. "Ma'am Kurz, please, he is a boy, he does not know how to behave!"

She tore about the room furiously, seized hold of the fluttering mosquito netting and ripped it aside. "Animal! Animal! This is what comes of it, I warned you all!"

"He is young, he been drinkin', Ma'am Kurz."

"Drive it down! Beat it down! Or we find ourselves skidding down the slime into the pit!"

"Everybody celebrating, everybody drinking, sure somebody will lose his head a little bit."

"Celebrating! Celebrating the ruin of the world! And because they've been freed, am I to let them flout me to my face? There is still order in this world. I *will* have order!"

The beating of the distant drums merged into another roll of faint thunder. The unmoving sun, however, shone as heavily as before.

Madame Kurz whirled upon the two astonished women. "What are you doing here! I've told you, no one downstairs before dinner! Get upstairs!"

Angélique, trained in the most severe schools to obey a certain tone of voice instantly, sped from the room in her bare feet; her slippers remained where she had kicked them beneath the chair.

Barbara stared at Madame Kurz a moment with uncharacteristic amazement. Then her expression slipped into its accustomed bland

contempt. Barbara reveled in a comfortable ignorance. She bothered to learn only what was necessary to maintain her comfort. The moments of discomfort she experienced — and they rarely occurred with the men she entertained in Madame Kurz’s service, who were selfishly undemanding — were forgotten quickly when comfort returned, and for her comfort was a simple thing of warmth, a full belly, the pleasure of soft clothing, and as little motion as possible. Such things were not easy to come by in the cold northern port of Boston, where sweat was honored above beauty, where flesh was valued for its strength rather than its aesthetic properties. But in Port-au-Prince warmth was free, a full belly and soft clothes were provided for the minimal effort of lying beneath and to whatever man would pay.

Barbara did, however, enjoy knowing what others strove to conceal, and to learn such secrets she displayed a crafty industry. So when she sauntered out of the room and swung the door to behind her, she kept it open a bare half-inch: just enough to conceal her, yet keep all that passed within the room easily audible.

Madame Kurz continued to pace the confines of the room. “That’s where it starts,” she growled, “showing themselves off in the windows, inflaming your men, giving them ideas above their place! And it comes to this! I’ll tell Heinemann, he shan’t let an insult to me stand. He’ll have that boy fayed, the skin torn off him strip by strip!”

Minoré stood now an inch taller, and spoke with surprising strength. “No, Ma’am, he can’t do such things now. Not to free men.” The thunder rumbled nearer, and a soft rain began to patter down. Minoré shrank back to his usual height and his voice weakened into conciliation once again. “But I will make sure such a thing never happens again. It is all my fault, bringing along that boy with me today and letting him come with me in the house. I take care you never see him more.”

“I couldn’t answer for my actions if I did!”

“No, Ma’am, you never see him more. I make sure o’ that. I take care o’ everything.”

Madame Kurz abruptly sank into one of the chairs. She pressed her fingers into her brow and gave a low moan. When she looked up again, the changed light of the sodden sky painted her with an aqueous tint, as

of a candle's flame glowing behind a green-glass bottle filled with dirty water.

She formed a fist and beat it gently, rhythmically against the arm of the chair. "Savages! Savages! We can't let them loose! To set them free, to open our doors to the darkness . . ." She gave another heart-rending moan, and there seemed to lurk in the few lines she permitted her handsome face a cunning dread, as of a desperate, delicious secret that must remain untold, even to herself. "We are so near the beasts! We must drive them down, beat them down, kill the clawed things that revel in the depths! An evil, grinning monkey within us all plays with its own filth, chatters with glee at obscenities. We have to catch it, cage it, wall it up before it wrecks the little bit of beauty we've managed to save from its greedy, clumsy hands!" She looked at him suddenly with pleading. "What else is there to be proud of in this life but the fragile treasures of art, of intelligence, of taste? What else can comfort us on this dreadful planet but the beauties we fashion from the chaos roaring outside our papered walls? But the beast hates everything beautiful. It snuffles at art, it rages to be set free to rend and tear, to use its teeth and claws on flesh. It wants the taste of living blood. I know how near that monster is. I've felt it scurrying inside me, tapping at me, pawing me, trying to rip me open so that it could run wild!"

Minoré said gently, "But is a man a savage beast only because he does not brick up his heart?"

Lost in her own desperate horror, she raced on. "I will not let that happen, not to me, not to anyone within my influence! I will control those dangers, release their pressure, send them into safe channels. That's what my house is for, that's why I built it, to keep the pressures checked, to use their energy to support what is fine. Minoré, the danger is so fearful! I've seen what happens when desire pours out unchecked. I've seen the horror freedom can make! My own husband, taken by the mob. Taken, not like a man, not even like an animal, but taken and ripped apart . . . like paper! And I . . . forced to . . . I will not let that happen again, not so long as my hand is strong enough to raise the club to keep them down."

"Ma'am Kurz . . . oh Ma'am . . . you scare me so!"

Madame Kurz pressed her right hand to her lips, as if to lock the burning words within her. There was a long moment of terrible tension. Then her hand fell to her lap, her face sagged, her shoulders dropped and she leaned back heavily. She wiped away a nonexistent tear and managed to produce a friendly, woebegone smile.

"You're a good man, Minoré. A loyal man. You've never forgotten your place."

Minoré grinned with relief. "I remember, Ma'am." He spoke with utter gentleness and compassion. "And I remember other thing, too." He dared move a step nearer, and almost reached his hand to her.

Madame Kurz shuddered and turned away. Yet in her turning there was no anger, no rebuff. When she spoke, her voice was soft, unstudied, honest as a child's. "We . . . we can't speak of remembering, you and I. There has been too much between us for remembering." She straightened her shoulders. Her voice became strong. "I deny all memories." She turned back to him and smiled. "Now go, Minoré. Go . . . my friend."

On the other side of the door, Barbara showed her teeth in what may have been a smile. She stroked her neck, as if running her fingers along an invisible collar. Then she moved away silently and climbed the stairs. As she went, she nodded her head from side to side, for the simple pleasure of feeling her long, heavy black hair caress her back.

Minoré hesitated. "And you will not say anything to Missa Heinemann, do you, Ma'am?"

"No. You needn't fear me, Minoré."

Minoré clutched his hat tightly to his breast. "Oh, I know that, Ma'am. You are a good lady, a kind lady. Old Minoré, he will stand by you, just like always, watch and see, he will."

Suddenly Madame Kurz grasped his big hand; but only for the briefest moment. Then she rose and left the room, her head bowed low as if she had been caught in some shameful act. Minoré watched her go, and felt a great sadness, mingled with something like pride. He put his hat on his head and left the house, thinking, She talks and she rages, but I know how to make her quiet. In the old days, when she first came here . . . when she came . . . I know how to make her quiet.

## SCENE 6.

There came another low rumble of thunder, much nearer than before. Below in the harbor the water began to rise in sharp waves before the wind. Clouds, strange, green like exhalations of the jungle itself, suddenly blotted the sky and made the late afternoon light murky with rot. The soft rain changed, fell in pummeling torrents that ripped at the earth and beat at the walls of the house until it rang like a drum savagely beaten by a madman. The women, upstairs in their rooms, scarcely noticed the noise, it was so common a thing, but their hearts were trapped in the skipping beat and made them catch their breaths at odd moments.

In the empty parlor the French windows shivered before the onslaught, then burst open. The mosquito netting swirled up, a spume of storm wetted the room, and Dieudonné's black face poked through. He was drenched and speckled with mud, his shirt clung to him like a second gingham skin, his trousers revealed all the strength of the rolling muscles of his legs. He listened carefully a moment, then squared his shoulders and swaggered into the room. He strutted a few steps with his fingers tucked into his armpits, a sodden, triumphant rooster claiming new territory. Then he saw the black stains of mud on the fine gray carpet, and his heart instinctively shrank with dread. But he set his face in a grim sneer and, with heavy, smearing strokes, wiped his boots clean on the rug. With a drunken laugh he removed his hat, shook the water from it in a wild spray, and tossed it across the room. It struck the wall and fell to the floor, leaving a wet swath on the delicate wallpaper.

As another blast of thunder shivered the air, he sat in one of the chairs and leaned back comfortably, stretching his legs. But his foot struck something, and he looked down, squinted in the dim light to see two lovely slippers tumbled together on the floor. He took them up like precious secrets. He touched their silk and traced the pattern of embroidered vines, leaves, blossoms. His handsome face softened to reveal the wonder of a child who has just learned there is such a thing as beauty. He put his face close to the slippers to see them more clearly, and his nose caught the delicate scent of the woman who had worn them. A brilliant crackle of lightning filled the room with pitiless white light. Dieudonné fell to his knees there on the fouled rug; he pressed the slippers to his face,



kissed them with a passion that was as shocking to him as it was natural. He kissed them again, and again, as the thunder of the storm and the thunder of his blood filled his ears.

The door of the room slowly swung open. Dieudonné ducked behind the swirling mosquito netting at the window, the slippers yet clutched in his hands.

Angélique's golden face peeked in, a dim glow against the gloom. She squinted, peered about, then stepped in quickly and shut the door silently behind her. She listened for a moment. Then she turned, moved to the chair, stooped as if searching. She stood up suddenly, annoyed not to find what she was searching for. She stooped again and touched the floor with her hands, swept them slowly across the carpet.

Dieudonné understood. He squatted and slyly pushed the toes of the slippers under the billowing draperies. Angélique saw and reached to take them, but Dieudonné pulled them back. Angélique started back, frightened, one hand covering her mouth to stifle a scream. Dieudonné stepped forth.

Angélique whispered, "You."

Dieudonné tried to smirk, but the woman was too beautiful. His desire made him wide-eyed and sincere.

Angélique relaxed: the fear was now replaced by an instinctive knowledge of her power over this man; but she remained tensed and poised for the new danger that threatened her.

"What do you want with me?" she said.

Dieudonné stood tall in the strength of his desire. "I see you before, and my soul take me hard with wanting you." His voice was low, dark and musical as a cello's singing.

"What do you want with me?" Angélique said again.

Dieudonné drew nearer. "And I see in your eyes then the same wanting for me."

"What do you want with me?" Angélique said once more.

Dieudonné stepped close to her, so close that the heaving of their breasts almost caused them to touch. He gazed down into the green of her eyes, his nostrils flared, his hands twitched, eager for the feel of her. His voice tolled forth now like a huge bell in tones so deep they were almost without sound, but they made her flesh tremble with the ringing music of

them. "I want you like any man, free or slave, wants a beautiful woman — warm and wanting and naked in his arms!"

Angélique cast a quick glance behind her at the door — to judge their risk or to weigh the possibility of escape? "There's danger for you here." She pulled back, the barest hint of motion.

Dieudonné stared. "There's always danger."

"If Madame Kurz should find you—"

"You want me, I see it in you."

"She was so angry—"

"You want me!"

Angélique could not breathe. The storm fell silent for as long as two beats of her racing heart. She gazed at this man, this hugely powerful, overwhelmingly gentle, yearning man. She gazed at him, and discovered in the beauty of his face a reflection of something she had not known existed in her. She closed her eyes tight before the startling pain of her own violent pulse. Then:

"Yes!" she cried. "God, yes, I want you! It's been so long since I've wanted anything more than food and shelter, but I want you!"

There came a gigantic explosion of thunder as the storm broke with fresh fury. Her arms flew about his neck, and Dieudonné caught her up, swept her up into the crackling air, held her, put his mouth on her, tasted the sweetness of her mouth, her cheeks, lost himself in the depths of her heavy hair.

Then, somehow, they were on the floor, cushioned by the soft, mud-stained carpet. Their hands and mouths seized at one another with maddening, insatiable hunger. Dieudonné knelt above her and tore off his wet shirt, revealing the deep crevice of his chest, the muscled ridges of his arms. Angélique raised herself, reached for him as a lonely child reaches for its mother, and his hands caught her dress, pulled it from her shoulders, her breasts. The lightning lit them with intermittent flashes of fire that seared disconnected images upon their eyes: his hand and mouth, the curve of her leg; her mouth, his nipple; her fingers raking the carved curve of his belly; the blackness of his thigh against the pale swell of her hip; his eyes gazing wondrously up into her ecstatic face; her eyes gazing as raptly into his.

Angélique's hand fell upon the dangerous twist of his whip where it lay beneath his crumpled trousers. She grasped it, raised it, traced a line along him to tickle his now excruciatingly sensitive skin; he gasped and his flesh bubbled up into goosebumps. He seized her wrist in one hand, tore the whip from her, swung it around her bare shoulders and pulled her down to him. Thunder boomed, and Angélique gave a quiet moan as his teeth grazed her neck. Dieudonné ran the whip down her back. He pulled her arms behind her roughly, bound her wrists with its leather. He fed upon her mouth, her breast, her belly. He let go her wrists, bound her face to his. The scent of their struggle overwhelmed the stink of the reeking jungle.

Angélique rose up on her hands above him. Her long hair, silver now in the blinding strokes of lightning, grazed the ebony mound of his chest. She traced the sculpted lines of him with her hair as he watched, breathless. Then she raised her head and snapped it forward, to lash him with the heavy length of her tresses. He groaned and closed his eyes in fearful rapture. She beat him softly. Their passion swelled with the storm's fury.

And behind the noise of their passionate discoveries, within the cacophonous blare of the storm, came distant cries of rage and horror, dread and raucous triumph.

#### Scene 7.

Out of the storm came distant cries of rage and horror and hideous triumph. The women of the house listened with mounting fear, then, as one, they left their rooms and gathered trembling in the upstairs hallway. They whispered among themselves and moved timidly en masse up the stairs that led to the top floor of the house, and the great carved door that guarded Madame Kurz's room.

One of them, a pale Norwegian whose eyes were now red and swollen with unshed tears, dared and raised a hand to give a quick rap on the heavy wood. The women retreated with a sharp inhalation, for such a breach of custom had never occurred in this house in their memory. At that moment the wind died, and in the sudden silence the far-off shrieks

of unknown atrocities rose clear and undeniable. The women cried out thoughtlessly, "Madame Kurz! Madame Kurz!"

The door slammed open and Madame Kurz appeared silhouetted in a sudden blaze of lightning: her face was chalky white, her eyes bruised and bloodshot, her hair disordered.

The women drew back again in dread as the storm rose in fresh fury to disguise the din of mayhem.

"What is happening?" Madame Kurz demanded in a low, inhuman voice. "What is happening in this house? Who knocked on my door?"

The Norwegian spoke. "Madame Kurz, what are those horrible noises out there?"

"Did you knock at my door?" Madame Kurz focused the terrible fire of her eyes on the woman.

Others spoke in a rush. "Madame Kurz! What's happening outside? There are cries and screams! Don't you hear? Don't you hear them?"

But Madame Kurz tenaciously gripped the outrage of that knock. "How dare you knock at this door, *my* door, before dinner is called?"

"There is no dinner!" a black-haired Irish child of fourteen shouted. "Amalia and Cecile and Hercule, they're gone!"

Madame Kurz blinked. She passed her hand before her face as though waking from too real a dream. "Gone?"

"They're gone, the blacks are gone!" the child said. "And outside, in the street—"

Madame Kurz repeated, "Gone?" She cast a blank gaze about the corridor. When her giddy vision settled, she saw Barbara, who stood behind the others, pressed against the wall, her face set in a smirk that barely concealed stark terror. Her mind filled momentarily with the image of Barbara's defiance.

She straightened herself and seized the lamp from a little table inside her door. "It is as I said. It is as I warned them." She moved with the comfort of crisis. "The blacks are destroying everything. They are murdering the foolish men who set them free. Quickly — Madeleine, fetch from the little closet our two rifles and the box of bullets and powder. All of you, go through the house, secure the doors and windows, then join me in the theatre. No lights! No whimpering! Hurry! And do

not listen. Do not listen to whatever you may hear from outside these walls!”

She lifted her skirts and rushed down the stairs. The women remained together, baffled, for a moment; then, in frightened pairs, they moved uncertainly to close and lock shutters and doors.

Madame Kurz hurried into the great kitchen to find the fire dead in the stove, the pots scattered about the floor, the bags of flour and meal and the plucked chickens for her dinner gone, the room filled with wet, the door swinging madly in the gale. She sped to the door and shut it against the wind, slammed the bolt to and pulled a chair across the stone floor to prop against it. She took a rapid inventory of the missing foodstuffs, then hurried on.

Outside her office she found a Junoesque young American crouched on the floor, her fingers holding her ears tight and tears distorting her face. “Nina.” She pulled the girl up and slapped her with curt efficiency twice. “There is no time for hysterics. We need you sensible. Go to the blue salon and lock the cabinets with the crystal. Hurry, child.” The girl choked and sputtered, nodded, staggered off to her task. Madame Kurz went into her office, pulled the shutters to, then drew a key from her bosom and unlocked the little cabinet. She sighed contentedly to find her strongbox safely closed and comfortably weighty. She set it on the floor, then opened it and pulled out the papers that guaranteed her safety among the rulers of this island, the papers that held the secrets of the rich, the not-so-rich, and the politically worthwhile. These she stacked neatly on the strongbox. Then she pulled back the rose-colored carpet and worked free two of the floorboards. She set the strongbox and papers in the hole, replaced the floorboards and the rug. Then she went to her writing, opened the left-hand door, and removed her silver-hilted letter opener, regarded it a moment, then slipped it up the sleeve of her gown.

As she left her office she locked the door, aware how little protection that could afford against a freedom-maddened field hand. Then she moved on, checking each room as she went to be sure it was secured.

In the music room she found the windows still open, the beautiful Erard harp, which she had had shipped from Paris only that spring, with its gilding and its painted soundboard slicked with rain, and she cursed the silly children with whom she was forced to share shelter. For all her

thoughtful education, for all her careful guidance, still they could not be depended upon in an emergency. If they had but witnessed the desperate times she had survived, if they had lived a single day of those months in the house of Hades, they would understand true strength. They would know of what a woman was capable. There would be no more of this mewling like kicked kittens. Coddled and pampered too much, that is what she had done with them. When this anarchy was ended, as it must be, in the resurrection of order, she would see to the proper handling of her girls.

She stepped into the parlor and moved to the French windows. Then she halted, with a hiss like the warning of an adder.

Angélique and Dieudonné started to their feet in a tangle of clothing and mosquito netting. Angélique pulled the netting about her, to cover herself, but Dieudonné ripped the netting from his face and legs until he stood almost naked in the light of Madame Kurz's lamp. Angélique opened her mouth, perhaps to speak. But she closed it again and said nothing. Dieudonné thrust his chin forward and placed his hands on his hips, in readiness for . . . whatever might be.

Madame Kurz stared. Then words came from her, low, horrifying tones that swelled until they cowed the storm. In my house. In my house! *In my own house you dare!*"

"Madame, I—" Angélique said.

But Dieudonné cut her short with an axelike motion of his hand. "Quiet! Don't shame us with excuses!"

Madame Kurz lost the precarious balance of her world. She teetered dizzily, raised her hands to her eyes, and dropped the lamp. The chimney exploded in a spangle, the flame died, oil seeped out and spread an indelible stain across the rich pile of the carpet. Now the room was lit only by the fitful light of the storm.

The thick odor of the oil brought her to her senses, and, seeing the stain, dull anger propped up her rocking horizon. "You seemed so obedient. You seemed so right for us. I had plans for you — I thought you different!" She drew herself up with the force of a vengeful heaven within her. "I thought you fit for my house! But the beast is in you, strong and wicked!"

She strode forward and seized Angélique by her red hair. Dieudonné was dumbfounded by the towering strength he saw in this woman. Madame Kurz wrapped that long, red hair about her fist and hauled Angélique by main strength toward the door.

Now Dieudonné roared like a maddened bull and leaped forward. He pulled Madame Kurz's hand free and pitched Angélique behind him. She struck the wall and fell among the shards of the broken chimney. The white skin of her hand and arm erupted in a spattering of red where the glass sliced her flesh.

"I'll kill you, you filth!" Madame Kurz howled. "I'll see you hanged and gutted like the dog you are!"

She pulled from her sleeve the elegant letter opener and threw herself upon Dieudonné. He ducked, then slapped her hand and knocked the blade away. Madame Kurz grunted, and they both scrabbled after the weapon. Angélique had seen where the blade had fallen and hurried to take it up, but Madame Kurz was on her in a moment. Her fingers locked about Angélique's face, clawed at her eyes. Angélique screamed, spun, heaved her mistress off and into the French windows, which cracked at the impact, but did not shatter. Madame Kurz plucked up the letter opener, but Dieudonné struck her, knocked her across the room. She growled like a hound and made to stand. Then her left hand felt beneath it the sinuous curve of a leathern whip.

She snarled with triumph. In an instant she raised the whip and cracked it at Dieudonné. He fell with a cry beneath the stinging lash.

The door opened and Barbara appeared, a candle held aloft in one hand. Angélique rushed to the doorway. "For the good Lord's sake," she pleaded, "stop her! She is mad!" But Barbara stood still in awful fascination as Madame Kurz cracked the whip again, and again, lashing the writhing body of the freed slave.

"Beast!" Madame Kurz howled. "Beast! Beat it down! Beat it down!"

Dieudonné crawled to a chair and pulled himself up. "Every stroke o' your hand I will bring back on you," he panted, and still the whip cracked, cracked upon his quivering flesh, "every stroke o' your hateful hand." He hurled the chair at her. She reeled back, but she did not cease the steady crack, crack of the whip, now upon his thighs, now upon his face, cutting it, striping it with one sharp line, two, of blood. "I'm a man

now, Ma'am Kurz! No one can treat me like the animal no more." He raised his arms above his bleeding face and cried, "No more!"

He ran through the open window into the storm, where the screams of the triumphant and the lost, the mad and the hopeless, mingled and made a clangor to shame the raging of fiends.

Madame Kurz dashed to the window; the rain beat her hair, her face, her breast, turned the red silk of her gown black as heart's blood. She slammed the window shut, and the glass now shattered with a sound of bells. She turned, and advanced on Angélique.

The girl whimpered and sank down at Barbara's feet. Barbara did not move. Madame Kurz now determinedly took Angélique by the hair, dragged her to the middle of the room where there was nothing to interfere, and raised the whip above her. "I'll lash it out of you," she muttered. "I'll lash it out of you."

Barbara breathed again. She carefully set the candle down on the floor, stepped forward and pulled the whip out of Madame Kurz's hand as easily as she might remove shears from a baby's fist, stood between her and the sobbing Angélique.

Madame Kurz said firmly, impatiently, "It has to be done. The beast has to be beaten down in us."

Barbara took Angélique's hands and lifted her to her feet.

"It has to be done, I tell you. Or the whole of humanity will die in screaming chaos!" Her voice rose, more and more shrill. "We are human beings, not dogs! Not beasts who mate in the mud!"

Barbara had led Angélique to the door. She paused there, and said quietly, "I've never seen a dog take a whip to another of its kind."

Madame Kurz's hand clutched spasmodically at her throat.

Angélique suddenly pulled free of Barbara's embrace. "Who is the animal here, Madame Kurz? Who is the beast? Who is the inhuman thing? A man and a woman who know their desires and face them proudly, speak them out and stand by them without shame? Or a woman who hides her wants, buries them, buries them like murdered, mutilated babies in the darkness of her heart? Who is the beast here, Madame Kurz! Who is the beast!" She collapsed into Barbara's arms as her tears burst forth afresh.



Madame Kurz's mouth shaped itself in the O of a silent howl. "Murdered . . ." she whispered, "murdered . . . I had to do it! They would have put me in jail, reviled me, destroyed me! I had to do it. The wee thing . . . murdered . . . murdered . . . murdered!"

She clapped her hands over her mouth, to hold the words in, lock them in. And then she slowly pushed her way past the two women frozen with horror, and wandered away into the darkness of the house.

Angélique sank to the floor in total surrender to her exhausted sobbing. Barbara knelt beside her, embraced her more tightly, kissed her hair and petted her gently. "Hush," she cooed. "Hush. Quiet, girl. They can beat you but they can't break you. There's a place inside of you, hidden, where everything is still and where no one can ever find you. Hush. Hush. Go to that silent, secret place inside you and put your hurt there. Hush. Wrap it up and leave it be. Then you'll be safe, no matter what they do. No matter how they try to hurt you, no matter how they strike you, they won't be able to touch the truth of you. Ssh. Then you'll be strong. You'll be strong, like me. And you won't feel anything. You won't feel anything at all."

## SCENE 8.

There was a crash as the large front door of the house was flung open, and the women, huddled in the theatre, screamed at the sound. Barbara clutched Angélique tight and they listened to heavy footsteps that moved swiftly nearer and nearer. Instinctively they shrank into the darkness of the room and held their breath. The footsteps paused, moved uncertainly toward the stairs at the end of the hallway, paused again, came quickly towards them and the open door of the parlor.

A shadow moved through shadows. Angélique knew that she would scream, must scream, in another moment, no matter that it mean their death, or worse. Then, just as she knew she could not remain silent another moment, Barbara darted forward and called out, "Minoré!"

The old man peered at them questioningly. "Who is there? Where is Ma'am Kurz, eh?"

The two women pointed wordlessly into the darkness.

"Where is Dieudonné? Mam'selle, please, where did the boy go?"

Angélique gasped and once again began to softly weep.

"You know he was here?" Barbara said.

The storm was done as abruptly as it began; the sun lightened the room with a dull, leaden glow.

"I knew he will be back, I see the anger in him. So I stay close by the house, and I see him run out, then I see him sneak in." Minoré dropped his eyes as he shook the rain from his hat. "I try to catch him, but Missa Valcoeur's men come by, they are drunk and doing . . . oh, they do awful things. Missa Valcoeur, he is a hard man, everybody knows it, how he is with his people."

"What did they do to him?" Barbara asked.

"No, not to him! It is what Missa Valcoeur do to his people! But he shouldn't do such a thing. And the little children, the little children, why, they never even know that people could do less than smile, but Missa Valcoeur, he . . . I never think to see such things again. Oh, it's terrible what the fear does to a people, what the fear makes them do. And I have to hide, or who knows what they might do with old Minoré then?" He looked at them, shame writ large in his weary, heavy face.

Barbara gasped. "You mean, it's the whites—?"

"What is he doing here, Mam'selle? The boy. Oh, what happen here, Mam'selle?"

Angélique stopped her weeping, certain that she could never weep again. "She beat him, beat him with his own whip." She stood, pulled her long hair about to cover her naked breasts. "He said he'd kill her," she said simply.

Minoré frowned with puzzlement. "Kill Ma'am Kurz? Kill my lady? I knew there was trouble here. When she yell at him like that, and he so excited with the day, and the rum, I knew there was trouble to come. She is so twisted up with hurt and fear."

"Fear?" Barbara said. "Fear of what?"

"Fear of herself, Mam'selle, and what she has done, and what she always know she could do."

Barbara's eyes lit up eagerly. "What has she done?" Minoré did not answer. "Answer me! What is there between you two?"

Minoré shifted uneasily beneath her demanding gaze. "Mam'selle, do not ask me that! Even I — and I know her since she come here with her man, and when he is killed, leaving her alone and with nothing — even I do not know all she has done. But I know it was something bad, something very bad, and it fill her up with fear that never will go away in all these years. Oh, she was a good lady when she came, a kind and beautiful lady. But fear . . . fear makes us all hateful.

"Please, Mam'selle, Dieudonné, he is my sister's only boy. Oh, where is he?" he pleaded. "Where has he gone?"

Now there was only the steady patter of dripping rainwater already becoming steam in the returning heat.

#### SCENE 9.

Madame Kurz tottered through the hallways blindly. Her breath came in short, ragged explosions. Her hands tapped trembling along the walls. She came to the stairs, raised her foot, missed the step, slipped forward, cracking her knee upon the tread. She did not feel the pain. She raised her foot again, gained the step, heaved herself upward. She counted the steps, one, two, seven, twelve. The second staircase, one, two, five, eleven. The heavy, carved door of her room hung open as she'd left it minutes before. She fell through it to the floor.

A black hand seized her and lifted her up.

Her blank eyes went wide. She looked into Dieudonné's triumphant death's-head grin.

She smiled.

"Yes," she said softly, "you are a handsome boy, for your kind."

Dieudonné started back. His hand fell away from her.

"A young girl who knows nothing of the world . . . yes, she might very well want . . . want . . ."

A spasm shook her. She fell forward, retching. But then her flesh went rigid. Dieudonné watched with horror the struggle in her as she took possession of herself again.

Madame Kurz stood.

He gasped.

She raised herself up, ramrod straight, and moved toward him. Dieudonné stumbled backwards.

"Beautiful," Madame Kurz muttered. "Beautiful . . . beast."

She tore the netting away from her bed. Then she smiled, and slowly, slowly, began to unbutton her dress.

Dieudonné stared.

"My whole life," she said, as if to herself, "my whole life I've been afraid . . . but there's no other way now, is there?"

"Don't," Dieudonné said. "Stop."

"Stop?" She laughed. "Now you are afraid of me? Now you are afraid of me!" She reached forward and took his quivering hand. He could not pull away. She drew his hand to her, placed it gently on her breast

Then her hand reached into a pocket of her gown, and she drew forth the silver letter opener. She placed the hilt in his limp hand.

"Come." She pulled him closer.

"Don't," he moaned. "Oh, don't!"

"Come."

She closed his fingers around the silver hilt. She placed the tip of the blade on her naked breast. "Just there, I think."

"Don't!"

She smiled.

#### SCENE IO.

They heard then, in the house above them, a long, welling cry that seemed torn from the bowels of those spirits that are worshiped with combat and fresh blood. Then the cry was swallowed up in a breathless burble, and ended.

The three stared at one another. Minoré's hands were trembling. "Oh, what he done, what he done?" he muttered.

It was Angélique who at last said, with grim assurance, "We must go and see, of course." And she walked out of the room, down the hall, to the stairs.

Barbara and Minoré, after a moment, followed. As they passed the theatre they saw a dozen faces in the doorway like a shelf of waxed fruit. They did not pause, but followed Angélique up the stairs, and again up

the second staircase, to the heavy, carved door that hung sickeningly ajar to reveal a darkness lit only by the crazy shafts of sunlight that shot through the closed shutters.

Here they hesitated. But Angélique pushed the door wide, and together they entered. They saw, first, the large four-poster bed swathed in the ubiquitous mosquito netting, and then the looming forms of an armoire, an overstuffed chair, a tall urn filled with paper flowers, their bright colors turned pastel with age. Then they saw Dieudonné, naked still, in one corner of the room. As one they followed his mute gaze to the inert form upon the bed, behind the veil of netting.

Minoré moaned and in a dreadful voice asked, "Boy, what have you done?"

Dieudonné shook his head. "I done nothing to this woman!" he said with a trembling voice. "I come to kill her, but I do nothing!"

Minoré stepped up to the bed and tore aside the netting. The lace coverlet on the bed was marred by a spreading red that seemed a continuation of her silk gown. He reached forward and tugged her hand from her bosom to reveal the ornate silver hilt of the letter opener, like a heavy broach.

No one looked away. No one made a sound. "The fear took her," Minoré said. "The fear and its child, the hate." He tenderly pressed his fingertips to her swollen eyelids and closed them.

"I done nothing to her," Dieudonné said with dumb insistence.

Minoré silenced him with a wave of his calloused hand. They stood silent yet a while. Then Minoré gave a low groan, and with a violent jerk he pulled the netting free of its frame and let it drift down to shroud the cold flesh.

When he spoke, his words were choked with bitter sadness. "Ma'am Kurz is dead by her own hand."

## Star-Born, Oblivion-Bound

My interface between nodic and cognitive functions disjuncted and I floated in an inputless aura of orbital funk. Most unpleasant for me and disruptive for my partner-components, who were awaiting certain gravitational cues to complete their orgasmic cycles. Their disapproval pushed at my electromagnetic orbital shell constructs, driving me into increasing eccentricity. This made my frantic efforts at repair even less efficient. I attempted apologetic excreta while working, but dissemination was hampered by the energy bursts of my alpha partner-component, who has always been impatient and rather vindictive. Finally, their negative energy shifted my polar orientation; this successfully reset my interface and allowed me external input, but left my cognitive functions muted. I never fully recovered from this trauma.

I mark this as the moment when I passed my half-life point. My partner-components deduced as much, and following completion of their individual cycles, first one then another made excuses for dissolution of our electrostatic bonds. My alpha partner-component was of course the first to go. It emoted

**You're slipping. Sad but true. Sorry, I just don't see the point in orbiting during the inevitable. It's been a grand ride. Take care of yourself.**

My alpha partner-component always considered its own needs first. But 29<sup>142</sup> cycles is a long time for any coalition, and I could not blame it. I

had indeed begun to slip. My revolutions had developed a disturbing stutter. Particles must look out for themselves.

After alpha dissolved our linkage, the others went quickly, some without even so much as a fond farewell. Barely  $8^{13}$  cycles later I found myself alone, abandoned, unpartnered except for brief nanoseconds as the odd tachyon stream paused in its mad dash to flirt with cyclicalilty, then passed on with a titter, a satisfied fluctuation, or a condescending waveform. The tachyon is a delicate thing, inconsequential in its thoughts and frivolous in its course. But they leave behind them a bubbling warp of space-time that effervesces the cognitive functions, and I was grateful for each joyful, if brief, confluence. More than one tachyon stream entered my magnetic sphere of influence for a revolution or two (for my half-life status was not yet immediately discernible), then raced away again in its quest for something wonderful at the other end of eternity.

### **thanks experience really pays**

I don't pretend to have explored all the reaches of the space-time continuum, but I admit to a certain jaded cynicism, and not a little envy, as they sped off with their naive, impatient expectations.

### **been fun bye**

For the first time since I achieved sentience, I was alone (spatially, though of course resonant entanglements can never be entirely relinquished). How had I come to such an imbalance? I thought back to my initial energy expenditure, when I broke the surface of my parent star. I remembered the terror and excitement of its loving expulsion as it hurled me into the cold reaches of physical space-time on a flood of gamma rays. I remembered the wild wonder of finding myself independent, coherent, self-cognizant, mobile, with all of eternity before me.

All of eternity! I was so unthoughtful then. Unmindful of the inevitability of entropy. But that is youth.

My rational facets had not yet coagulated. I acted on pure instinct. Without heed to resonant entanglements I interacted with any particle whose effusive influence I happened to encounter, without plan or

concern. I formed my protective electromagnetic shells, the first drab and functional, the second more brightly vibratory, and on and on with increasingly conscious craft, until with my final shells I achieved true brilliance. What a dandy I was then! I reveled in my strength, my ability to support so many masterful, energy-intensive shell constructs. And I fancy I was attractive, for other particle-entities approached, investigated my own sphere of influence, flirted with my polarities. We coupled and parted with unheeding joy, inattentive to resonance and all that that implies.

Then, during one cycle, what would become my alpha partner-component plunged into a determined orbit about me, and from it I learned the pleasures of pure complementarity, a complementarity that deepened with every cycle. Yes, I noted its radiative flaws, and it noted mine; but that made our interchange somehow even more precious. From my alpha I learned generosity. Not that it was generous! Selfish, in fact. But the give and take of complementarity is both generous and selfish, pleasing another so that one may be pleased. Others came to me. I coalesced with many of them, sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes casually. But even from those who only bounded by for a single cycle's exchange, I received, and I hope gave, pleasurable exchange. I remember them all, and all without regret. They made me what I am. Was.

After some cycles, of course, the mad interchange slowed and my partner-components settled into contented coalition. We set off together on the adventure that is universe.

I remember the thrill of our first rides down the gravitational rapids on the threshold of black holes; the majesty of radiative conflicts in pulsar interstices; the heady disorientation of irregular waveform braidings around newborn blue stars still learning their fission principles; the drowsiness of coasting along the comforting burble of simple radio waves.

But that is all past now. My potentialities have shrunk, my capabilities withered. My partner-components have left me. I am, in terms of prospective and conceptual volition, alone.

I suffered a lack of impetus, surely not unusual for one in my position. I wobbled aimlessly in my spatial equilibrium for  $8^{19}$  cycles. In this drifting state I by chance permeated the probability distribution of an elementary particle. The distribution instantly noted my impolite incursion and



irregular revolution, and articulated to me, with that multiple resonance peculiar to its kind,

**WWhhaatt iiss yyooouurr pprroobbbleemm??**

The irregularities in my revolution lent an embarrassing quaver to my response.

Sorry. I was not attending to my course. I'm afraid I've been rather discombobulated lately. You see, my half-life point has evidently been passed, well, some time ago, and my partner-components dissolved our bonds. I've really been rather at a loss, and and and I'm just not . . . well, my capabilities seem to be decreasing exponentially, you see . . .

This impressed even me as pathetically self-pitying.  
The probability distribution was not overly compassionate.

**TThhaatt iiss hhooww eexxiisstteennncee ooppeerraaatteess.  
Eevveerrytthhiinnngg iinn iittss ccyycclee. GGeett oovveerr  
yyooouurrsseellff.**

This casual osmotic indifference blasted me from my passive course to a state of active energy depletion. I rushed in a horror of self-reproach from the elementary-particle probability distribution before I could be expelled. I fled so rapidly that I approached tachyonic velocity. Portions of my outermost electromagnetic shell began to pit and fragment. This excruciating agony brought me back to sentience. I fought down the panic that had gripped me and finally re-entered rational functioning. I seized frantically at the gravitational fields of a parade of hydrogen to slow my impetuous career. (I am afraid I ionized a few of them.) But at last I slowed into orbit around an oxygen-neon-magnesium white dwarf star who had not yet suffered gravitational collapse, and there I rested until my rotations regulated.

**IS SOMEONE THERE?**

I started. So enrapt had I been by my own worries that I had not requested the dwarf star's permission to orbit. I was in fact unprepared to find myself noticed by it. I articulated,

**Forgive me! Please don't consider me rude, but I was preoccupied.**

I refused to give way to another such maudlin episode as had occurred within the possibility distribution, and so I restrained my articulations.

The dwarf star responded,

**QUITE ALL RIGHT. IT'S JUST I WASN'T SURE WHAT MIGHT BE THERE. MY SENSES AREN'T WHAT THEY WERE. AND THEN, I'VE BEEN ALONE SO LONG. YOU SEE, I CONSUMED MY SATELLITES, OH, CYCLES AGO, IT SEEMS. FEW ENTITIES BOTHER WITH US OLD STARS.**

This resonated sadly with my own cognitive distress.

**WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU? NOT AN ASTEROID BY ANY CHANCE, EH?**

The notion that I might be an object of asteroidal magnitude demonstrated the star's advanced senescence. Also, it made this comment with a distinct aura of hunger. I shifted my orbit imperceptibly to a wider elliptical and replied,

**I am star-born.**

The star sent a chuckle of X-rays in my direction.

**MM-HMM. MM-HMM. THOUGHT YOU FELT FAMILIAR. I HAVEN'T EXPELLED IN THE LONGEST TIME. IT'S MUCH MORE RESTFUL, I MUST SAY, WITHHOLDING MY EXPULSIONS. WELL, I'M NOT AS STRONG AS I USED TO BE. I DREAD TO THINK WHAT AN EXPULSION**

**WOULD COST ME NOW! THOUGH SOMEDAY, IF I GET  
THE URGE . . . PLAN ON STAYING LONG IN MY  
INFLUENCE?**

I had not considered my future course.  
The star continued,

**IT WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE SOMEONE TO  
INTERCHANGE WITH.**

I did not know how to respond. The star's palpable hunger was unnerving, though I could not imagine I would make a satisfying energy morsel for any star, even an oxygen-neon-magnesium dwarf.

The star sensed my hesitation.

**NO NEED TO MAKE UP YOUR MIND RIGHT AWAY.  
PLENTY OF TIME LEFT IN THIS CURRENT  
CONTINUUM, EVEN IF WE TWO AREN'T AS YOUNG AS  
WE ONCE WERE.**

This communication did not reflect logic to me, and its reference to our shared advanced age did not ease my mind. I asked,

**What do you mean, this current continuum?**

But the star's cognitive functions had wandered to something else.

**EVEN MY GALAXY HAS NO TIME FOR ME ANYMORE.  
I'M JUST ANOTHER OLD COMPONENT, SKIRTING ITS  
OUTER BOUNDS.**

I responded,

**I can't stay long.**

The star gave a resigned exhalation of helium it could ill afford.

MM-HMM, OF COURSE. YOU STAR-BORN ARE ALWAYS  
SO RESTLESS. AND WHY WOULD ANYONE CARE TO  
ORBIT ROUND A STOLID OLD ENTITY LIKE ME?

I hastened to correct my impoliteness.

I didn't mean . . .

The star interrupted me.

IT WOULD BE NICE TO HAVE SOMETHING TO  
INTERCHANGE WITH AGAIN. YOUR DIMPLE IN MY  
GRAVITATIONAL FIELD HAS REALLY PERKED ME UP.  
MY REVOLUTIONS HAVE BEEN SLOWING THIS LAST  
LITTLE WHILE. I NEVER GET THE CHANCE TO  
INTERACT ANYMORE.

My own interactions had been so disturbing lately that I felt some  
relief of pressure to have something pulsing genially at me again.

The star continued slyly,

I CAN'T QUITE CATCH YOUR INFLUENCE WITH YOU  
SO FAR OUT. WHY DON'T YOU CONTRACT YOUR  
ORBIT, JUST A BIT? SO WE CAN INTERCHANGE MORE  
COMFORTABLY?

There was that undercurrent of hunger in its radiation again, and its  
dull bulk swelled slightly, expanded toward me. I widened my orbit  
perceptibly and glanced about for a convenient trajectory.

I really must be going.

The star trembled and shrank back with a rueful depressurization.

AH WELL, AH WELL, PERHAPS YOU'RE RIGHT. THERE'S  
STILL A UNIVERSE OUT THERE TO HURRY THROUGH.

**NO POINT ANYONE WASTING THEIR TIME PATTERNS  
ON ME.**

I felt ashamed of my suspicion, but I did not draw nearer.

**I don't mean to offend.**

The star responded,

**NOT AT ALL, DON'T THINK IT! I'VE ALWAYS BEEN  
PRAGMATIC. NO WISHFUL THINKING IN MY FISSION.  
BUT IT HAS BEEN A PLEASURE, EXPERIENCING YOUR  
DIMPLE . . .**

I sent to it a polite rejoinder.

**And for me as well.**

As I hurried off, I felt it pulse in my direction,

**I HOPE YOU ENJOY YOUR PASSAGE. DON'T LET IT SLIP  
BY UNNOTICED. . . . SO FEW PAY ATTENTION TO THE  
IMPORTANT THINGS. . . .**

Enjoy my passage? I found this an odd farewell. To what passage was the star referring? The only passage I could imagine was entropic dissolution from coherence to incoherence. How could such a passage be enjoyed? This dwarf star's senescence was obviously far advanced.

I spent a few cycles examining my problem logically. I was not, after all, the first entity to reach half-life. Other entities had come into existence and passed on; others would come into existence even after I . . . But this logical construction opened within me a gulf of incomprehension deeper and more demanding than any black hole. To understand, to confront the fact of my imminent dissolution, was not within my diminished

capabilities! Even the knowledge of my resonant entanglements, careening across the current continuum in distant reflective trajectories, offered no solace.

Witnessing the old star's advanced decay state determined me not to succumb passively to stasis. I sped off to the most densely populated galaxy in the immediate vicinity, where star crushed against star with voluptuous abandonment, and thrust myself into the busiest particle pools. Newly star-born entities compacted here in intoxicating confusion, exploring polar combinations, testing potential partner-components for compatibility, or simply reveling in hedonistic energy displays. I was hesitant at first, but I was not static yet, and so I entered my most cheerful waveform, polished up my patched electro-magnetic orbital shell constructs, and approached various accommodating entities whose fields were not repulsive. Within a few cycles one responded with a flirtatious waggle of delta radiation. We circled, gravitated, informed and perfused. Then it was off again.

**thank you thank you bye**

Emboldened by this successful coupling, I approached others with more confidence. Some offered quick frictions, some happy interchanges. Some left me with only a smiling shift in spectrum.

Then one regarded me with a piercing magnetic flux, drawing me into its orbital influence almost against my will. Our perfusion was harsh, combative; it tested and tried my compunctions and compulsions, forced me into humiliating wavelengths, pierced my shells without even the semblance of respect for my coherence (though I do not deny how thrilling this was), and irradiated me until I was nothing but a sick mass of arrhythmic pulsations. In this abased condition it left me, with a contemptuous fart of ionization.

I was near energy exhaustion as I extracted myself from the galactic center. I suddenly remembered moments from my youth when I had witnessed less energetic entities — entities, I understood now with queasy recognition, well past their half-lives — attempting to renew their unrenewable resources. I had noted such scenes, if at all, with bemusement and a wry comment. Now, as I slowly refreshed my sagging

electromagnetic constructs, I overheard an entity who appeared scarcely star-born remark,

**Poor old thing, whyever does it carry on so? Isn't seemly.**

Shame swept my cognitive functions in a bright green wavelength, but this time I was too expended to rush away into solitude. I moved slowly, unable to avoid contact with this or that shimmering young thing, and every ripple of laughter that dispersed across the star paths seemed directed at me.

For an uncounted number of cycles I went my way past the far-flung fringe of outer stars. I skirted black holes and did not test their rapids. I avoided pulsars and the nebulae where stars form. Even the quiet ripple of radio waves irritated my hypersensitized nodic functions. My energy depletion worsened with every cycle. I could barely control my revolutions. I began to move more carefully, wary of irregularities that might damage my weakened shells. Needing to conserve energy, I reluctantly dissolved my outermost electromagnetic shell, the one I had been most proud of. I picked my way slowly, carefully, but did not attend where I went.

After a desultory series of cycles I suddenly noted with surprise that I had entered a space-time locus free of photons, free of tangible wave activity, free even of the background microwave hiss I had taken for granted since expulsion. My very entanglements were imperceptible. I had, unconsciously, attained the utter emptiness and radiation-silence of the bounding curvature of space-time, where universe swallows itself.

The quiet was appalling. And yet, once I subdued the hysterical spiking of my electrostatic fluctuations, I found myself strangely comforted. Here, at least, without the constant regard of other sentient entities, I could bear the sensation of increasing energy inadequacy.

Cycle succeeded cycle. I did not monitor them. I did notice, however, that my rotations had slowed, were slowing, with every cycle. Was my energy diffusing so soon after my half-life point? Or had time-space itself shifted into a different, unexpected state here in the sloping regions of universe? The gradual decrease in my habitual velocity prompted cognitive patterns I had not before entertained. I wasted cycles

attempting to reconnect with my distant resonant entanglements, but finally realized how unimportant they were. I knew that some entities considered their resonant entanglements a form of immortality, but I was now fully aware how little my entanglements really reflected me. I concentrated myself. Without partner-components, without neighboring etheric entities, I found a new capability which, if it did not satisfactorily replace those I had seemingly lost forever, offered its own compensatory pleasures: I began to contemplate the energy potentiality inherent in the concept of simple oneness.

This energy state did not allow the heady restlessness of my previous half-life, but it was a steady pulse of power that seemed to promise nearly infinite cycles, cycles necessarily more constrained in physicality, but limitless in cognitive function. I dimly sensed that there might yet exist potentialities more far-reaching and more interesting than any I had imagined. I wondered — and this is most puzzling, for the possibility was not accompanied by any sensation of triumph or even vibratory excitement — if my inevitable decay may in fact generate a new energy manifestation.

And yet — my pragmatic nature again — I was also cognizant of the possibility that my discoveries were only the result of the wild, self-deluding desire that I could somehow evade the laws of entropy and, unlike all else in universe — unlike even universe itself — not experience dissolution.

Yet I continued my contemplation. There was nothing else for me to do. Though my energy requirements had lessened noticeably, I had already been forced to abandon several of my electromagnetic shells. One after another I expressed them, freeing for other uses the energy that had been necessary to maintain them, until I retained only one, to maintain my coherence: the first, drab shell I had constructed in my youth. My physical revolutions diminished and slowed, but my — how can I make comprehensible that which is not describable in physical terms? — my non-physical cyclicity — that cyclicity that energizes only through contemplative activities — sped faster and faster. Wild orgies of speculation burgeoned in my thoughts that beggared all physical energy exchanges I had ever experienced. Here on the very concave bounds of space-time, I began to understand that particulate interchanges, radiative



signals, electromagnetic perfusions, all the joys of what had been existence, were diversions. Mere diversions. Appropriate in their time cycles, yes, but diversions from what now seemed to me the true, sole purpose of our crazed passage through this magnificent, multivalent continuum: to learn the secret of the great mystery of what lies beyond the ellipsoid bounds of perceivable space-time. To learn what exists beyond existence itself.

Perhaps I was delusional after all. Perhaps this feeling of imminent grandeur, just beyond my electromagnetic flux, was the sign of my approaching dissolution. But I could not ignore the excessive vibratory excitement that shook me.

I haltingly and with much effort approached the unapproachable, self-referential bourne of space-time. The vibratory silence was painful in its undeniability. I perceived my hard-won energy stasis already waning; my self-cognizance wavered, oblivion threatened. I realized with a vibratory trepidation I could not master that there was only one way I could retain coherence in this cold and empty region even a cycle longer: I must dissolve my last remaining electromagnetic shell. I would be vulnerable, but I must attain the limit of time and space, and if the price for that was my very coherence, so be it. I would go on, I would attain, and I would learn, I would perceive, if only for a nanocycle.

With cold determination I withdrew my energy from the shell construct. My last shell, that drab, cobbled thing, trembled, tumbled about my poles, and decomposed in a dazzling burst of unencumbered radiative glory, as if all the beauty denied it these long, long cycles would be denied no longer, demanded expression in its demise. I contracted from its revealed splendor, I impeded my velocity at the terrifying expansion of its released force. Caught by this unanticipated radiance, I imagined that the very universe itself shuddered in awe.

But then it was gone. The universe remained unimpressed.

I comprehended at last my utter self-absorption, my complete unimportance in the greater scheme.

I was naked, fully naked, for the first time since my star birth.

This was the moment of my dissolution. This was the end point of my coherence. I should have moved toward that which lay beyond. I should have thrown myself with my last energy resources toward that boundary.

Instead I did not move. My very revolutions ceased. All vibratory emanation ended.

But.

Then I perceived.

I perceived that which was, as I had not at birth, when I was too eager to rush through existence to waste time pondering what pulsed at the origin of all.

I perceived the steadily slowing pulse that echoes the first burst, the first burst, the near-eternal beat of of of of of the expansion and retraction that is that is that is all all all the beat the beat the beat. And it pulsed within me, within me, within me that contains no within. My own pulsation was done. Yet I pulsed, with a pulsation incomprehensible to the self-regulating, the self-obsessed, the self-limited. All pulsed in me. I was all. I . . .

I? What is was I? What could would be I? Is there I in that eternity beyond mere eternity? Is there I in the existence beyond the petty all that all believes is all?

Do not count in cycles that perception. No cycles cycle, or perhaps what cycles there are move so slowly, or so rapidly, that they are no longer cycles. Only know no sufferance of energy cessation. Is this dissolution? Yes. No. Indeed, what is thoughtlessly termed *I* exists more intensely than ever before. Before. Before. A concept the strangeness of which is not cannot be understood until . . .

The concave boundary of existence vanishes from perception, becomes . . . not convex. No physical concept contains what becomes. No longer common space-time continuum.

There . . . what a notion, *there!* There is no *there* at all. *There* is nothing. *There* is everything. Absoluteness. The first cause of all thereness. *There* simply is, and yet cannot be perceived. *There* is all vibration decreased or increased to imperceptibility. Perfect stillness. Perfect motion. *There* is the chill of utter singularity. Yet *there* is all. Infinity, finally infinity, true infinity that the physical space-time continuum merely mocks.

Time perceived is misperception. Memory acknowledged and ignored.  
No there, no then, no now, no here, no syntactical cause and or effect.  
Sequential inconsequence, syntactical obsolescence. I-not-I am am-not.  
I-not-I am am-not was I-not-I am am-not there is there is not is all not-all  
but be be be be be

## End of the World

You reach the end of the world by walking, hour after hour, day after day, across a vast, flat, rocky land so empty, so unremarkable, that you realize you know it well. There is nothing to catch the eye. The sky overhead is always gray, day or night. There's not even a breeze to take your cold sweat away. Nothing moves except you. There is no sound but the scarcely audible hush of the sand as it trickles down into the footsteps you've left behind you. When you rest (for you must rest sometime, even here), when you can't take another step, you sit, probably on a rock, and count the grains of sand that slip into your old footsteps. You count, you rest. Then you walk on.

The flat land finally comes to an end. There is a wall here. On the wall hangs a sign: Caution. The End of the World. Beware.

The sign is unnecessary. Beyond that sign, beyond that wall, is nothing. Nothing. No land, no sky. Neither stone, nor breeze, nor air. Nothing. Simply nothing. The world ends, and beyond the wall . . . nothing.

You do not experience vertigo. Vertigo requires a depth. There is no deep here. There is nothing.

You cautiously reach your hand over the wall, and quickly draw it back again, for you see that your hand, when stretched over the wall, is not. Understand: your hand did not disappear. It simply was not. You pick up a rock from the many rocks on the ground, weigh it, pull back your arm, think a moment. You throw. The rock flies over the wall and, without a sound, becomes nothing. You feel a strong desire to follow.

Instead you look along the end of the world from one side to the other. The wall stretches as far as you can see. To the end of the world, you think gaily. The gaiety quickly withers. This is the end of the world.

So you stare into that nothing. The flat land behind you, the dim light of that flat land, becomes nothing. You see only nothing. After a long while — but what's time at the end of the world? — after a long while you think you sense something in that nothing. Something that is not nothing. You sense — there is no better word for this — a certain comprehension, some understanding that only nothingness can contain. A comprehension you lack.

You look from one side to the other, and again you see the end of the world. And you see all the people in the world, all those now living and all those who ever lived. It's quite a crowd. They stand along the wall. They all stare into the nothing. You are curious: Do they also sense some comprehension, an understanding they never had and will never know? Some knowledge that negates their present, a present that veils their staring eyes?

If you were able to feel anything, you would feel fear, or humility. But fear, humility are trivial emotions at the end of the world. Emotions cannot endure before nothingness. Trivialities don't last here.

You look from one side to the other. Everyone else is gone.

If you could turn your back to the nothing, you also would be gone. Nothingness — which, after all, is only nothing — certainly doesn't demand that you look. But you cannot turn your back to it.

You remember the sign: Caution. The End of the World. Beware.



